THE MAGAZINE

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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ISAAC ASIMOV

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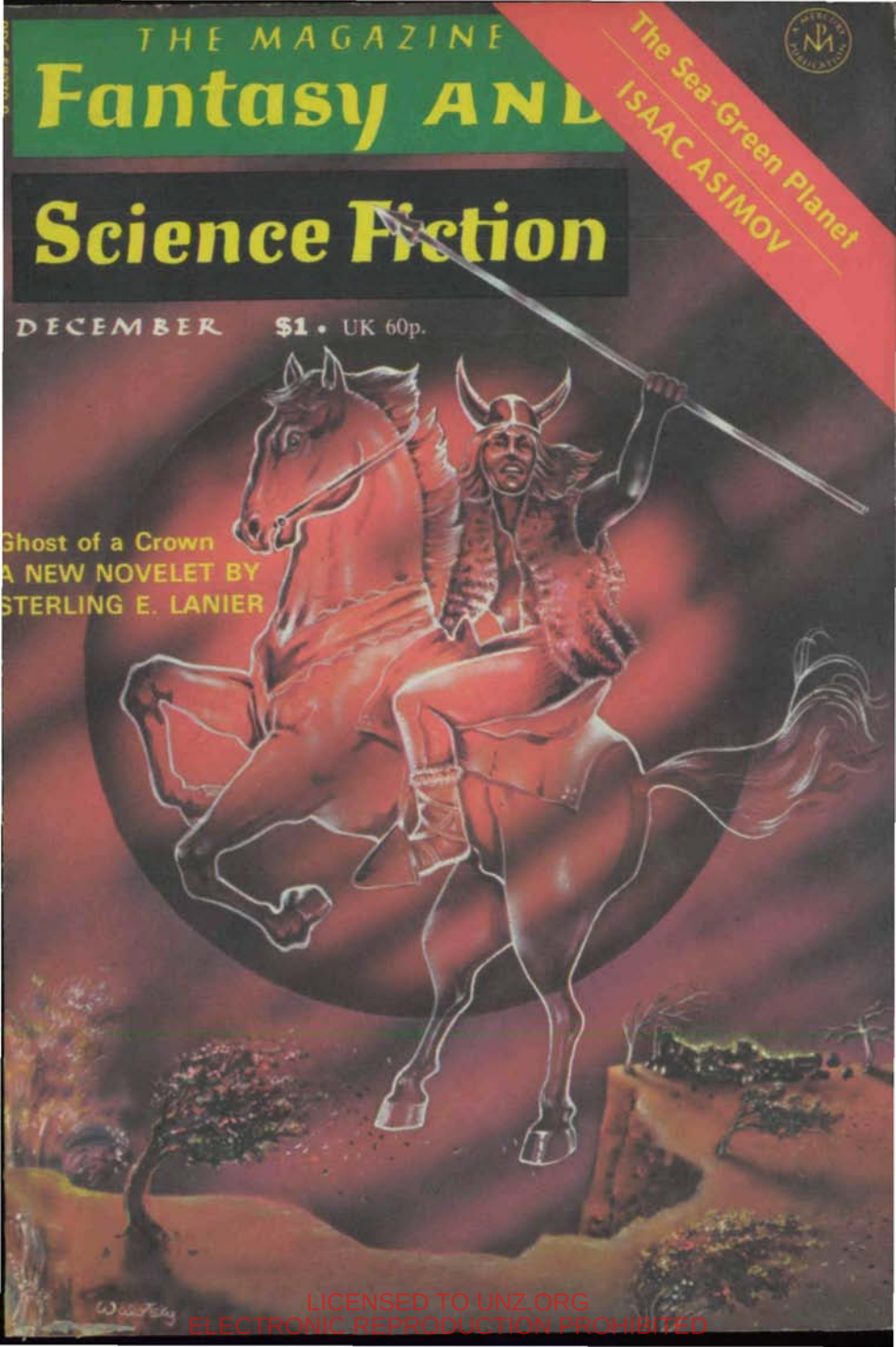
A NEW NOVELET BY
STERLING E. LANIER



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DECEMBER • 28th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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Cover by Ron Walotsky for "Ghost of A Crown"

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A fantastic tale from Brigadier Donald Ffellowes is long overdue (the last one being his Sherlockian adventure, "A Father's Tale," July 1974). This new story is prime Ffellowes, concerning some frightful doings in a windswept Cornish castle, and it is sure to please both fans and newcomers.

Ghost of a Crown

by STERLING E. LANIER

"Ghost stories are *passé* in some circles, I suppose," said a new member. I didn't know his name, but he was a younger man, of what, I guess, could be called a bookish type. He had rather thick glasses and a thin, angular face. He was drinking Madeira, which is not much in vogue with most of my acquaintances, but I didn't hold that against him either.

It was a cold spring night, and the club library had a fire lit at one end of the long room. A group of us were sitting in one of the big bay window alcoves overlooking Fifth Avenue, and the park looked rather gloomy in the drifting mist below. Personally, I'd rather hit Omaha Beach alone than go into it at night.

"I like them myself," said Bryce. He was something important in the Bank of New York. "I read them in my office, that is, when my secretary is busy." This raised a mild laugh. "In fact," he went on, unperturbed, "I have a standing order with Blackwells, in England, to send me any new ones that look good. And I even put myself on the lists of some of these jobbers that deal in science fiction, horror stories, and such things, in case some of the old ones come in that sound good." He sipped his drink. "Actually, I've found that some of the best are long out of print, and damned hard to get hold of."

Perhaps a banker was needed to break the ice, the image of bankers being so stuffy and conventional, even to those of us who knew better. It turned out that a whole lot of us read ghost stories, horror stories, wild fantasy, and so on. In no time an argument was raging over who wrote what, who wrote best (and worst!), and various schools of

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opinion began to get sorted out. For the library it was a pretty noisy scene. Two old gentlemen drowsing by the fire got up and left, muttering about seeing someone on the house committee, but we paid them no attention, being busy attacking H. P. Lovecraft or someone similar.

During a lull, the younger guy who had started the whole thing suddenly asked, "But *why* do you all enjoy these things? Is it because your lives are so dull today? Or is it that you'd really *like* to believe that there are things beyond our level of knowledge, powers of darkness, say, that still can reach us at times and in certain places? In other words, friends, what grabs you about all this, as the kids say now?" He was quite excited.

We all thought for a minute. Frankly, I don't think any of us had ever given a hell of a lot of thinking time to why we enjoyed being frightened or whatever.

The young guy, whose name turned out to be Simmons, went on. "Is it the same reason children ride roller coasters? Or do you think it may be something deeper, such as a feeling that the ancients, perhaps, knew more than we do, that a deep well of lost knowledge underlies all the broomstick and Halloween nonsense? And that by reading the stuff, you both acknowledge its reality and in a subconscious way, well, pay it a sort of respect?"

Well, the argument started afresh. Some of us admitted we liked being scared (I was one), especially if we knew we could always close the book! But a few others picked up Simmons' idea of a racial memory of the ancient past, and started telling of strange things that had happened to them or to people they knew. I noticed the really strange things were always those that had happened to someone else, while the ones that they had experienced in person sounded pretty flat.

I think almost everyone present must have had the same sequence of thoughts simultaneously. They ran: Yes, these experiences *are* dull and banal-sounding, and next — Ffellowes!.

And, of course, there he was. Leaning against the end bookcase in the alcove, just as if he'd been there all evening, and none of us, as usual, had even seen him come in! God knows how long he had been there, or how much he had heard. He was smoking a long thin cigar, very pale in color, and sipping brandy, which he took, incidently, in a tumbler.

We introduced him to Simmons, who had never met the brigadier before, and rather confusedly explained what we had been talking about, then more or less sat back, not quite panting, but pretty obvious.

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Our English member smiled politely around at us. His pink face was bland, but the bright blue eyes were amused. Oh, he knew what we wanted, all right! If anyone in the room could lay claim to knowing the strange and the inexplicable, the man who had served the Empire all over the world, who had encountered more weird things in person than we had ever read about, was surely the man. And he knew we wanted a story. He teased us a little.

"I just had a nice brisk walk through the park. You chaps ought to get out more. You're all simply getting fat, sitting around here."

I ask you! A nice brisk walk, at 38 F, through Central Park at eleven at night! That was Ffellowes, all right. If a gang of muggers jumped him he probably became invisible! Yet none of us doubted he had come that way.

He turned to look at Simmons for a moment, in a reflective way, and I rang a bell for a waiter to bring us a fresh round. I had learned the signs by now.

"You postulate, Mr. — er — ah, Simmons," he was saying when I looked back, "that we are subconsciously aware of older things, or past, well, unpleasantnesses, which once had power, and might still, under certain circumstances? May I ask if those are in any way your own beliefs or are simply put forward as the basis of a discussion?"

Simmons kind of drew back a little. "It is a theory, I believe, that some people hold: that some places, and some persons even, are influenced by the ancient past, and that certain things can allegedly be summoned by the right people, in the right place, and even at the right time. Personally, I have no views on the matter." His face turned a little pink. "I should say," he added, "no views that I care to give at the present time or verbally." He retired into his glass of Madeira, leaving us a little puzzled.

"I see," said Ffellowes, and I had the idea he *did* see, though what it was he saw, I was damned if I knew.

A waiter had drawn up another chair, and the brigadier sat down and took a sip of his brandy. The room was suddenly very quiet.

"Many years ago," came the clipped English tones, "I had a friend who was Cornish. I don't mean he lived in Cornwall; I mean rather that he *was* Cornwall. His family, and, yes, he had a title, had lived there since time immemorial. They owned a ruined castle, and I mean a really frightful ruin, all tumbled stones, and also a delightful manor house, called Avalon House. Goodness knows how old the castle was, but the house was 18th century, a lovely

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thing of aged brick, surrounded by wild gardens and overlooking the Atlantic. It could be most wind-swept but was very wonderful even in winter. There were great tangled hedges, which had been planted strategically, to keep off the worst of the wind, you know, but it still could howl about the eaves in a full gale. The family were not of great wealth, but not poor either. Occasional judicious marriages with nabob's daughters and city merchants, I expect. A very normal county custom and a very normal county family, of no particular note, with a fat paragraph in Debrett's Peerage.

"We'll call my friend the Earl of Penruddock, which sounds right and was neither his name nor his title. He and I had known each other since childhood, having gone to what we call a "little school" together, what you fellows call a grade school, I think. We were not the closest of chums, but rang each other up at times when one or another was in London, for a lunch or a drink. He was quite a normal specimen of his class, had served in the Grenadier Guards before succeeding to the title. He hunted with the Quorn and grew prize roses. When he married, I was an usher, and his wife was equally suitable, a distant cousin with some money of her own, a jolly girl, who loved the country as he did.

"I was startled one day, therefore, to get a wire from James (that was his real given name) asking me down in a curiously urgent way, down for a visit to Avalon House. There was a sort of appeal in the wire, you know, something such as 'your advice most necessary' and 'would be extremely grateful if you could see your way,' and so on. All very peculiar from one of the most composed men I ever knew. I was doing odd jobs for the War Office already, and I found out James knew this, through what might be called the 'old boy's circuit.' Still, I couldn't imagine what had made him think of me in particular.

I arranged a leave, ten days or so, with my chief, wired James to have me met and set off by train. It was late April, and as I changed to the small local train, a sort of Rowland Emmett affair with a staff all ninety in appearance, the countryside was really lovely. We went through a number of sleepy little towns and green valleys, until in late afternoon the creaky old car attendant warned me that Tolferry was next.

"James was there to meet me and I was shocked at his appearance. He was a big blond chap, like me in his late twenties, with a Guards mustache and normally a genial grin. Now, though, he looked both pale and harassed, as if some overpowering worry, some strain of

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overwhelming proportions were eating at his vitals. He tried to smile as he seized my bags, but it was a poor effort. Yet there was nothing in the least false about his relief at seeing me.

"'My dear man!' he said. 'This is really awfully good of you. I'm at my wit's end. I had heard...' and here he paused in some confusion, 'not to put too fine a point of it, that, well — hm — you sometimes do very strange things for your department. Not that you ever say anything but...' By this time we were in the car, and I quietly told him that he was not under suspicion of betraying official secrets." Ffellowes paused and sighed. "This was long before types like Philby had appeared, thank God. One's friends were still trustworthy.

"'I came to pick you up myself so we could talk privately,' he went on. 'I think I'm about to go mad at times, Donald, and you know what a slow-and-solid I've always been. I'm afraid I'll be up for commitment if anyone finds out what's going on down here, and, damnit, I'm a J.P.'"

"I almost laughed, since madness may as well affect justices as any one else, but it was obvious that James had no humor left in him. In fact, to my not-untrained eye, he appeared on the verge of hysteria. So, I simply tried to soothe him as we slowly drove along the cliff road in his lumbering Diamler. And as the grey Atlantic foamed about the cliffs far below, the gist of his story began to emerge.

"'It all began with Lionel.' That was how he started. And I was surprised. For I had not known that his younger (and only) brother, Lord Lionel Penruddock, was even in England. And yet Lionel Penruddock had a way of making his presence known. Nor was he one to hide his light under a bushel.

"Lionel Penruddock, at this juncture, was one of the most brilliant and also most controversial members of the younger school of archaeology. He was also, in the opinion of many, a complete swine. He used women as if they were cattle, and at least one girl was known to have committed suicide over him. As a young man, he was asked to leave Italy, at roughly the same time as Aleister Crowley and his Coven, and for the same reasons, or worse. He could now no longer dig in Egypt; even the easy-going Egyptians having had enough of his treatment of native labor, which had culminated in the deaths of three experienced men whom he had run afoul of, or the reverse The verdict was 'loss of life due to a sandstorm,' but no one believed it. There was much more which I will not go into, and not all of it was this personal. The Foreign Office, as we knew, was beginning to take an

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interest in Lord Lionel, who had many strange and quite un-archaeological friends in many countries, including both Russia and Germany.

"When all this has been said, it has to be added that he was also a master of his chosen profession. He was that rare thing, a truly, all-round expert. One year he was astonishing the world with the work he did at Gohklat, and its amazing revelations of the Sarmatian Migrations. The next, he discovered the Codex Panamensis, extending the Old Empire Maya hundreds of miles beyond their previously known southern boundries. And his fantastic recovery of a Gokstad type of Viking ship from the Namib Desert of Southwest Africa made even his most bitter professional rivals admit that he had genius.

"I had thought him to be in the Far East, but he was not. And as we drove, my poor friend attempted to tell me why his brother's appearance had so upset him and his household.

"'He simply popped up here, Donald, about a month ago. Had a couple of chaps, very rum ones, too, with him and asked if he could use the cliff cottage. Well, Isobel can't stand him, you know, and if he wanted to stay, this way he was at least out of the house. I've never got on with him, and he makes it plain he thinks, and always has, that I'm a complete ass. But, well, he *is* my only brother and he's never asked me for anything before. He's got his own money, you know, and lots of it. Mother left him a packet and he is no fool at business. So, the long and the short of it is....'

"The long and the short of it was, of course, that James, good fellow that *he* was, had told his brother to use the cliff cottage as long as he liked, assuming not unnaturally that Lord Lionel sought no more than a quiet vacation. This building was a comfortable house made of stone and perched on the edge of the cliffs not far from the ruined castle of the ancestral Penruddocks. They did not use it, and it was usually to let, often to artists of some means. It was a mile from Avalon House, and that was a million miles too close for my friend's wife. Lionel's wedding present (he did not attend at St. Margarets, Westminster, needless to say) to James and Isobel had been a Tantric image of such startling and revolting obscenity that James, noting it to be covered with jewels of undoubted worth, instantly sent it under seal to the British Museum, where no doubt it still reposes in some obscure vault. It certainly could never be exhibited. That incident may give you all some small idea of Lionel, by the bye.

"Lionel, however, reappeared at

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the house during breakfast the following day, making his brother and sister-in-law extremely nervous, since they had expected (and hoped) to see nothing further of him during his stay. But he was perfectly polite in his sardonic way, and he could be charming when he chose. What he wanted, it seemed, was something quite simple. He had a little time on his hands, and noting and remembering the old ruined pile of stone, the aforesaid 'castle,' he had come to ask his brother for permission to dig around and about it. His two 'assistants' would be all the help he needed. I'll have occasion to speak further of these two.

"James could see no reason why his brother should not pursue his excavations if he wished. The castle was even further from Avalon than the cottage, which may have played some part in his decision. And the place was not much visited. It had an ill-omened name throughout the countryside, and the children did not play near it, while adults mumbled about 'pookahs' (the local 'good folk') if the site was mentioned. It crouched on a black fang of rock which thrust out into the ocean far below and was really nothing but a gigantic jumble of stones, some of them, including the foundation, of absolutely enormous size and all laid without mortar. It had not been occupied, so far as anyone could tell, since early Plantagenet times, and some said it was far older. No roads led to it, and it had escaped the attention of any serious researchers up to that point.

"Lionel left with his brother's permission and did not reappear. He got his supplies sent in by truck, and one of the two assistants barrowed them over the hills on a cart to the cliff cottage. Lionel had a shooting brake, an early form of the American station wagon, but it was not much used, save for a rare trip to London once in a while.

"At this point, my friend stopped the car, or rather pulled off of the road to one side. His hands were actually shaking and frankly, I was just as happy he had them off the wheel. The road, as I have said, often ran very close to the cliff.

"One week after permission had been given to dig, the phenomena, for want of a better word, commenced. And they began, appropriately, at night."

Ffellowes put his cigar out and rang the bell for another brandy. He stared at the books opposite him, but no one spoke, and the crackle of dying coals in the fireplace was quite audible. Then he went on.

"Now what I am going to tell you next is not my own information, but second-hand. Nor was it as clear and sorted out as you chaps will hear it. James was a fine fellow,

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but a good specimen of *Anglensus inarticulatis*. I had to keep making him stop and go back over things, and also to keep him from interrupting himself or simply mumbling. The fact was, he was so terribly embarrassed about the whole thing, even with me, and also so frightened (and ashamed of that) that he simply couldn't tell a coherent story. But what I heard finally was roughly this:

"On the night I mentioned, everyone had gone to bed early, as country folk tend to. Around two in the morning, James was awakened by a sound, or rather, two sounds. The first was the sound of a horn, a brassy, echoing bawl, not the clear note of a hunting horn. As he sat up in bed, the horn fell silent, and the night was broken by a hideous screaming, as if, as he put it, 'a thousand pigs were being killed all at once!' Then, there was silence, except that all the dogs on the place, a half dozen setters, retrievers, and such, all started to howl in unison. These in turn fell silent, but a great wind began to sweep in from the Atlantic, and all the house shutters and doors rattled while slates were dislodged from the roof. This sudden gale lasted about fifteen minutes and then died away as suddenly as it had started.

"That was the first incident. Of course the whole household was roused at this one, maids scurrying about and squawking, grooms rushing about, gardeners in an uproar, lights blazing and general confusion. James took over with a few Guards bellows and managed to restore something like order, but it wasn't easy. Those screams particularly, had been appalling. Isobel got the house staff in shape finally, while James led a force of the younger men out with lights and shotguns to see what they could find.

"They found nothing, I may say, either then or the next day, nothing at all. And when they got to the cliff cottage, Lionel appeared and, on being questioned, denied hearing a sound. James informed the police, and a local bobby came out, poked about and went away, managing to convey without words that the gentry should have better things to do than bother the police with utter nonsense.

"For three days nothing further occurred. That is, nothing tangible. Yet, there was a feeling of oppression in the atmosphere, very odd in March, to be sure. The servants were nervous, and one London maid gave notice and left at once. On the third night, James was roused from an uneasy sleep by more screams, but this time plainly human and emanating from his own house, from the servants' wing in fact. Rushing to investigate, he found the butler trying to control

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the cook and the maids, one of whom had fainted while the others were simply hysterical. When the unconscious one was revived and the others quietened, the girl told the following story:

"She had been sewing in her bedroom when she happened to look at her window, which incidently was shut. Pressed against the glass was a face, and she almost fainted again attempting to describe it. It was very pale, she said, and the eyes were black and burning. The hair was long and black also, and so were the beard and mustache. A great weal or scar ran across the forehead. She had screamed and her friends had run in from their adjoining rooms. The first in had seen movement at the window also, though no more than that, just as the room's occupant had fainted. Now even as they all stood in the girl's room, they were all suddenly aware that the wind had risen again from out of the west and was roaring at full blast about the house. And James felt a strange tingling of his skin, as if, he put it, he were somehow in the center of an electric discharge. He did then not ask if the others felt anything, not wishing to add to the panic, but he did ask the butler alone the following day, and the man, an old soldier, said that he at least had not noticed it.

"The wind dropped again and they all got back to bed, all the servants now sleeping two to a room." Ffellowes smiled at us as he continued.

"What I have omitted from my account is that the servant in question, the maid, lived on the *third* floor. When James examined the room both from the inside and from the lawn on the following morning, he grew very upset indeed. The house, you see, was covered with an immense and hoary canopy of ivy, and it was clear that this had been disturbed in more than one place. Some of the stems of this plant were over two inches thick, you know. Whatever the girl had seen, and she was a local lass of an unimaginative nature, it was clearly material.

"My friend and his wife decided to face the matter in the open. They called in all the staff, from outside as well as the house people, and told them they could leave, that they were not expected to face whatever was going on, and that the Penruddocks would think none the less of them if they did, though they themselves would stay. It was their home and their responsibility. And here, I may say, James interjected something that interested me greatly. 'I felt somehow, Donald, that whatever happened, I *had* to stay, was *compelled* to stay, what?' he told me.

"Well, he and his wife had a

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surprise coming, and a very pleasant one. The staff had had its own conference earlier, and they were *not* leaving, not even the girl who had fainted. They were all Cornish men and women, and the Penruddocks were *their* responsibility, as well as the other way, you see? Remember the loyalty of Cornwall to Charles the First when all else was lost? Under the sometimes stolid Saxon exterior, there burns often the ancient stubbornness of the Celt.

"This display of loyalty heartened Isobel and James immensely, and Isobel even wept. Then they all got down to business. No one, when asked, thought that calling the police again would serve any purpose save to embarrass all concerned. On this they were all agreed. James issued all the shotguns and sporting rifles that he owned, and most of the men were veterans of the Great War. They arranged watches and made sure all doors and windows were locked after dark. Then they waited.

"James did one further thing. He went to call on Lord Lionel. He found him in the yard of the cliff cottage, issuing some instructions to one of his assistants, a short dark man with a most unpleasant face. As it happened, he approached without either of them seeing him at first and heard Lionel addressing the other in a foreign language, or rather, he thought, a very local one. Few in those days spoke Cornish, the original tongue of the land, which like Gaelic and Erse, was even then dying out, leaving only Welsh as the surviving British Celtic. But my friend had once had an old nanny who spoke it, and he thought he recognized it, though, as he put it to me, 'It didn't sound quite right, but foreign somehow.'

"When Lionel saw his brother, he seemed irritated and waved his helper away. 'What now, noble Earl?' he said in an unpleasant manner, 'more of your bogles frightening the tweenies?'

"James kept his temper and simply told his brother what had happened and asked him to keep his eyes open. The response was a jeering laugh. 'Good God, James, I think you've all gone round the bend up there. Faces at the window! I should think you would keep this to yourselves. Well, I'll say nothing. I don't want to be known as the brother of a lunatic, infected by the hysterics of a still-room slut. But don't expect me to join your witch hunts. I have better things to do.' And with that he had stalked into the cottage. This was the help he offered his only brother, who had never done him anything but kindness.

"James had expected little else. Lionel had been as hateful and unfriendly as a child as he was as a man. So this display was nothing

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new. But, as he told me about it, a thought began to stir in my own mind. All of this pecular business had started when Lord Lionel appeared. Was there a direct connection?

"My friend went on with his tale, less disjointed now and easier to follow as he became somewhat more relaxed. It appeared that he and his household were living under siege, in a way, and a strange siege it was. The apparition of the face had not reappeared, but other things had. For one there was the smell.

"It had first been noticed in the cellars, by the butler, who was looking through the wine bins. It was a rank stench, which seemed to seep through the floor; and although they had bolted the cellar doors and stuffed rags around the cracks, it still got into the house, though far more faintly or the place would have been unlivable entirely. I smelled it myself later on, and I can assure you it was awful, a reek of graveyard mold, mixed with other, less describable things. Further, it seemed to ebb and flow, being weak at times and billowing up at others.

"The house had always kept a few sheep in a paddock, and also a small herd of dairy cows. One night, two sheep and a cow were found slaughtered, and not simply slaughtered but frightfully mangled, as if by a pack of wolves. No one had heard a sound, but the wind had been going through one of its sudden western gales, and it would have taken an artillery discharge to penetrate that. Indeed, this strange new wind, which always blew from the west when it came, was another mystery. It came at the same time or sometimes a bit beyond one of the other outrageous happenings, as if they summoned it; and though it did no direct harm, the Avalon folk were learning to dread its coming, for it always seemed to presage some appalling happening, or at least the imminent discovery of one.

"James had pulled the car back onto the road and we again resumed our slow way over the hills and gulleys. As he drove, he continued the sequence of events at what had once been the happiest of homes.

"'Thank God, Isobel and I have no kids yet," he went on. 'We were sorry before, but, by the Eternal, we're not now. They'd have gone off their chumps at half of what we've been through in the past fortnight.' And this remark also set me thinking, though in a quite other direction to his.

"Now we were winding up the long drive to Avalon House, leaving the sea cliffs at our backs. As we pulled up to the entry, we saw two figures on the stairs. One was Isobel, whom I knew and loved,

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but with her face pallid and haunted-looking, and lines no woman her age should have possessed around her eyes and mouth. She seemed particularly glad to see us both.

"There was no welcome in the eyes of the other figure, and I knew who he was long before James made the introduction. I had seen Lord Lionel's picture on many occasions, but I should have known him anywhere, I think.

"He was middle-sized, far below his brother's blond bulk in height, and as dark and pale as James was fair and ruddy. He was by no means ugly, his long black hair framing a white clean-shaved face of considerable good looks. Nor was he a weakling, for his shoulders were immense for his stature, and his grip was that of an athlete. Yet I disliked him on sight, the instant I saw the cold jet eyes, and should have done so even had I not known of his past record.

"His voice was rather high and strident as he turned to speak to his brother. 'You'll have to call off those peasants of yours, James,' he said in an arrogant way. 'Damned if I can afford to have these taradiddles of yours mucking up a site I am working on. That fool of a gardener was staring at my men the other day for an hour while they worked. They are highly trained and I can't afford to have them upset, d'you hear!'

"His tone was quite insufferable, and his brother flushed to the eyebrows. I was expecting trouble right then and there, but James controlled himself admirably. I expect he had had plenty of practice in his youth.

"'I shall see no one bothers you,' he answered coldly. 'You know why the men are looking about even though you profess to believe none of it. Since you have neither help nor advice to offer, I suggest that you, in turn, stay out of *my* hair!'

"It was a funny little scene, or rather odd. Lionel actually took a step backward, and Isobel looked at her husband in puzzlement. I don't think either of them had expected the icy tone or the rebuke from my gentle friend. I must say it took me by surprise as well.

"Lionel left abruptly and we went into the house. The butler, Traheal, was an old acquaintance of mine from the Penruddock townhouse, and he took me up to my room. 'His Lordship told me why he had asked you, Captain, if I may be so bold,' he said. 'We badly need some help, sir.' His voice dropped as he went on. 'The Powers of Darkness, sir, that's what we're facing. In my opinion, we need a priest. If this goes on we'll all have to leave.'

"He had been a sergeant on the Western Front and was no chicken.

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I bathed and got ready for dinner in a state of some perturbation.

"Dinner passed quietly, but conversation was strained, and there were long periods of silence as each of us fell into our own thoughts. We went early to bed.

"I awoke suddenly about three a.m. with a sense that something was about to happen. On impulse, I moved to the window and looked out. A red half-moon was partly hid by racing clouds, and the wind seemed to be rising. The stunted trees down toward the cliff face were bending toward the house. For some reason I felt that something was racing to the land from far, far out on the deeps.

"Then there came a sound. It seemed to come from a long way away, but it was very loud. It did have a direction, which seemed to me to be down the coast to my left. I was on the second floor, in a room facing the front drive and hence the sea. As to the sound, it was really several sounds, a medley, so to say. Overriding the rest were what sounded like the blaring of several immense trumpets, echoing and challenging, a brazen uproar. Under this ran a strange susurration of what sounded like shouting, or perhaps screams, with an occasional ringing noise, as of metal being struck. All this ran perhaps twenty seconds and then was cut off suddenly. There was a pause and I could hear the west wind gathering strength.

"Across that in turn broke out the horrible squealing cry, or cries, which James had described to me in the car as the sound of pigs being killed. But in me they produced a different reaction. I felt I was listening to something with a note of triumph, as if something foul beyond endurance, and not only foul but alien, was rejoicing and reveling in victory. It made my flesh creep, and my hands went white as I pressed the window ledge.

"This, too, was suddenly cut off, and now the wind was making all the noise needed, tearing and raging in from the ocean and buffeting the house with great fury. The clouds were blasted away from the moon, and far out at sea I could see the white spume of great waves.

"On impulse, I opened the window, which, like all in the house, had been both shut and bolted. The wind tore into the room, making the heavy drapes stand out, and actually pushed me back a bit! As it did so, I had the most extraordinary sensation. I smelt apple blossoms! And not just smelt them, I felt drenched in the scent, delicious and exhilarating. Now early April may produce this scent in southern England, but hardly at night on a sea cliff in the midst of a gale! Time seemed to stand still as I inhaled the delicious

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odor, and I could hear nothing over the roar of the great winds.

"Then, that too was gone, after some few minutes, perhaps ten. The wind dropped to a gentle breeze, the clouds gathered, and a light rain began to fall. I was suddenly conscious that my room door was open, that I was wearing silk pajamas and was getting awfully cold. I slammed the window shut and turned to find James standing in the doorway.

"He was wearing a dressing gown and slippers over his night clothes. And he was staring at the window and the night sky over my shoulder, a strange look of pain on his face. His face had lost any trace of its normal amiability and looked hard and set. He spoke softly, as if to himself.

"'Too late, too late!' he said. 'Ever the cycle repeats and there is no escape.' His voice dropped and he said two more words I could hardly catch at all. One sounded like 'curse' while the other might have been 'migraine' or something that sounded like it.

"Then his face cleared and it was as if he had seen me for the first time. 'Well, Donald,' he said in his normal tones, 'what do you think of a month of things on that nature? A pretty noise to have around one's home, eh, quite apart from all else. D'you wonder I fear for Isobel's sanity?'

"'Why don't you leave?' I said on impulse. 'Or at least, send her away while you and I try to puzzle this out.'

"'Because she won't go.' His voice was inexpressibly tired. 'Not unless I go and I *can't!* I must stay and face this thing down and I don't know why. I just know I *must.* My God, what have we done to be afflicted with this?'

"I did not refer to the earlier words he had spoken, then or later. I was sure, you see, that he had no memory of them and would have been further upset by the conviction that his mind was going, and this was the last thing I wanted. We were going to need clear heads before this business was over, of that I was sure. But the words had started a train of thought in my mind, though I hardly dared voice my thoughts, even to myself. They were too monstrous and incredible.

"The next morning I spent some time in the library, a vast old place in which my host and hostess seldom entered, neither being bookworms. It had many rare volumes, collected by ancestral Penruddocks no doubt, but modern things, too, and I had no trouble finding the reference I sought. I still could not quite face what I was thinking, for if I was right, a tragedy as old as time was building up before my very eyes, and I was powerless to interfere.

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"The morning passed quietly enough. None of us referred to the previous night, by common and unspoken agreement, but the faces of all of us were haggard and full of strain. The servants were very quiet, but their faces were set and grim. Their's was loyalty indeed. I honor them.

"After lunch I asked James if he thought Lionel would mind if I strolled down to look at his site. The castle lay a mile or so south on the coast, and for reasons of my own I wished very much to see it, as well as to find out exactly how it could be reached in the most expeditious manner.

"'Can't think why he should object,' said my host. 'But you've seen what he can be like, damn him. He's always been like that, you know. A word and blow, that's Lionel since birth. No one but mother could stick him at all, and he even frightened her at times.' His face hardened in thought.

"'I can't think why you shouldn't be allowed to look at his work. It's my own castle, when all's said and done, not his. Go ahead. He'll hardly be likely to treat you as he does the servants, after all. But you can be prepared for some piece of rudeness, all the same. I wish to goodness he'd take it into his head to go away! I don't think he has a friend in this country, even among his fellow pot hunters.'

"Back in my room I put on heavy shoes, for the track to the castle was a rough one, I had been warned. I also borrowed a stout stick, of blackthorn, from the cane holder downstairs, and thus equipped, I set out.

"It was a still afternoon and fog lay in the hollows. I had excellent directions and a pocket compass as well, for there were bogs and ghylls as well as the sea cliffs, of course. But I swung somewhat inland. I did not want to be observed as I went from the cliff cottage, and the road ran past the drive to Avalon and stopped there. I saw the roof of the cottage well before I got to it and was able to avoid it by going even further east until I was well past. The going was not bad, and though I saw no bogs close by, I caught glimpses of livid green in the distance, but way off my line of march. Now I angled back toward the coast, and after another half mile or so, I saw the castle in front of me. I had studied pictures of the thing in the house, but the reality was something else.

"A great point of dark rock jutted out over the sea, perhaps a hundred yards square. In the center of this, on a flat area, lay a huge pile of tumbled blocks, as black or blacker than the weathered cliff on which they rested. The foundation layers were intact, to double the height of a man, but

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above that, all was destroyed. The huge blocks of stone looked as if some giant had reached down and crushed the upper courses into ruin, like jackstraws turned over by a child. I do not think modern explosives could have done a more thorough job, even today. I had no idea that engines of destruction had reached such a level in medieval times, or even earlier, if some of the rumors about this place were correct.

"The area looked truly desolate, for I could see none of the white streaks that would indicate that sea birds nested there. But as I worked my way closer, down a bracken-covered slope, I began to feel uncomfortable. There was an atmosphere I did not like about this pile of time-worn rock. I could see why the locals disliked the place. I felt an air of something menacing, as if somewhere around me something old and strange were brooding over its wrongs, with silent hate emanating from every fiber of its being. I raised my glance and saw the smoke of a steamer far out on the wave-tossed horizon. Around the cliff foot, hundreds of feet below, the sea beat endlessly with a constant roar. But this view of normal things did not dispel the feelings that had been aroused by the pile of shattered stones before me. Almost, they seemed to increase them, by making the place itself even more of an intruder, something which had no habitation here in the normal world.

"I was not very close to the foundation, no more than a few feet, and suddenly, out of a hole I had not even seen in the rocks, a little to my right, a man's head popped out, making me start back. We stared at each other for a second in silence, and then the man whisked down into the cavity from which he had emerged so silently. Now, I could hear movement below, and the dark visage of the person whom I sought appeared. Lord Lionel climbed out easily, and I now noticed the very tip of a ladder protruding from the black hole behind him. Two other men followed him, and the three stood watching me attentively for a moment.

"Lord Lionel was the first to break the chilly atmosphere, though he did not sound particularly friendly.

"'Ffellowes, eh? Come to look over the dig? Didn't know you chaps at the War Office ever got outdoors these days, let alone took an interest in archaeology.'

"Now this was a bad mistake, and if I were right in my gathering suspicion, the first the man had made. That I was attached to the War Office and not doing regular duty in my own branch of service was not all that well-known a fact. James knew it because he had

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asked very high up indeed. That much I had checked. But this meant that Lord Lionel had also been asking questions about me. I let none of this show in my face but looked casually about, while very conscious of his intent gaze. And I managed to get my first good look at his two helpers. They were interesting, too.

"They might have been brothers and perhaps were. Both were short massive men, very swarthy, unshaven and dirty-looking in soiled work clothes. They had high cheekbones and narrow black eyes, eyes in which I read contempt and dislike as they watched me impassively.

"Lionel must have noticed something, since he suddenly spoke harshly to them in a language I had never before heard, a tongue both lilting and harsh at the same time. I suppose it might have been Cornish, as James thought, but these two looked like nothing I had ever seen in Cornwall, or anywhere in the British Isles, for that matter.

"Both men ducked back down the ladder, and as they vanished into the depths, something stirred in my memory. Men like these and piles of black stones somehow went together, as if belonging! Now, what was that memory?

"'Not much to see, I'm afraid, Ffellowes. I'm still trying to clear a lower passage. There have been a number of rock falls. It's a bad place and only for experts. Can't ask you down, I fear, since the risk is mine should you happen to be hurt.' Under this show of concern lay an almost open sneer. I was not to be allowed down, whatever the pretext, that was plain.

"'Shouldn't dream of troubling you,' I answered, keeping my face as blank as I could. 'I'm sure you and these chaps of yours know how to work in safety. Never cared for scrambling about in holes, myself.' I dared not be too much the silly ass, but I could hint at it. 'What was that jabber you were giving them? Some Wog or Gyppo language?'

"His dark eyes narrowed as he studied me. I hoped I had not overdone the Pukka Sahib image. The wind soughed and wailed around us as he answered slowly.

"'Yes, it's an Arab dialect. My helpers were trained in the field by my own methods, in the Near East. This way they don't gossip. I don't like gossip, Ffellowes, or prying either.' He took a step closer to me. 'Now, my dear captain, I have work to do. I suggest you finish your Cook's tour elsewhere. Perhaps,' he added, 'you can go back and hold my brother's hand. He seems to need it, now that he's taken to believing in bogey men.' The malice was naked and so was something else. James had told me that his

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brother held him in contempt. But this was not contempt that I saw, but pure hatred, a very different thing.

"'I say, that's a bit raw,' I mumbled. 'Still, if you have things to do, I'll push on.' What I should have liked to do was push in his nasty face, or have a good stab at it. I had determined not to lose my control, and I turned away still mumbling inaudibly.

"I thought that was to be the end of the encounter, but I was wrong. I had underestimated the depths of Lord Lionel's anger. His temper, always evil under the surface, now flared up. I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I was spun around to find him glaring at me from a foot away, his face bone-white with passion.

"'You can tell my brother to stay out of *my* hair!' he hissed at me, his voice actually shaking. 'Tell him to stay away from here and keep his damned house pets out of my business, too, or, by heaven, I'll give him something to really moan about! Now, get out!'

"This was too much, even for my role of chartered idiot. I chopped his hand aside with the edge of mine, a blow that really hurt, and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince. 'I think, sir,' I said coldly, 'that you have been in too many primitive places recently. You forget yourself. This *is* England, you know.'

"I meant to infuriate him further, in the hope of learning more; but I was only partly successful. His face contorted in fresh rage, but suddenly changed. Over it instead, stole a most malignant and evil smile.

"'Yes,' he said in quiet tones. 'Now how could I have forgot that? We are in Merry Old England.' And he began to *laugh!* Still chuckling, he stalked over to the gap in his ruin and lowered himself down, without giving me the benefit of another glance.

"I walked back toward the house over the main track, having no reason to conceal myself any longer. As I walked I tried to puzzle out all the mixed and convoluted things and impressions that swam about my mind. One of them was the realization that whatever tongue his lordship had used to his men, it was nothing out of the Near East. I knew something of those languages even as a young man, and the inflections were totally different. So, why had he lied? Because the real truth would have meant something, would have given some clue as to what he was doing? I concentrated. James thought the language to be Cornish or something like it. It was not Gaelic or even Welsh. I did not speak either, but had heard both often enough. Could it be the soft Celtic of Ireland (though that was a rare speech even

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back then). No, the consonants were far too harsh and clipped, and those two stunted giants looked like no Sons of Erin in my experience. The answer lay elsewhere, and as I thought, the vision of those two and the great black stones came unbidden to my mind, and with the vision came the solution. There was *another* Gaelic, or rather Celtic tongue still in use in Europe! I saw in my mind the great menhirs and dolmens of Brittany, the stones of mist-shrouded Carnac, lost in antiquity, about which dark legends still circulated among the peasants. Those two were Bretons!

"Now why should the employment of Bretons be a secret? I racked my brain as I strode along past the cliff cottage, paying the place no heed, since I knew it to be empty. I think I later paid for this piece of egregrious stupidity, since I might possibly have had a very useful look around. But, meanwhile, I was turning over in my mind what I knew of Brittany, ancient and modern, which was damned little, actually. I knew, and don't ask me why, that they had a dismal separatist movement from France and even a 'national anthem,' whose name sounded like 'Bro Goz Ma Zadou.' This meant nothing. I surmised that it was the past of Brittany, the last Celtic stronghold on the continent, that was important. And of that I knew little. No one seemed to know who had built Carnac. The whole peninsula had always been a hotbed of legends and folktales, even before medieval times. Among other things, King John, Richard the Lion Heart's most unpleasant brother, had murdered his nephew, Duke Arthur of Brittany, who had a better claim to the Plantagenet throne than he. And what else? Something was just out of reach in my mind! Legends, cults, Carnac, Prince Arthur (why that name?), Celtic mysticism, black stones, west winds, apples, all of this mishmash meant something, if only I could think of *what!*

"By this time, I was at the house and I hurried in to tell James what I had seen. We sat in the old drawing room, and I related my afternoon to both of them. Isobel, after pouring tea, told me that none of it, save for one thing, conveyed anything much to her.

"'You've seen what he's like, Donald,' she said. 'You have no idea, really, what poor James has had to put up with, even going back to childhood. Many of the stories are family secrets. No, James, I simply won't be silent any longer, not to Donald. Why was he asked here, if not to help?' James subsided into a chair, muttering 'dirty linen' into his tea cup.

"'I think you are quite correct,' she went on to me, 'about this

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hatred, I mean. Yes, he has pretended to find James silly and stupid, but I have seen him look at James when he thought no one else was watching. He hates you, darling, and always has.' She turned back to me, her tired face still glowing with love.

"'When they were still little, Donald, still in the nursery, Lionel tried to kill James. They are only two years apart, apart in age. He packed a fruit cake, or rather James' portion, with ground *glass!* I don't think he could have been eight years old!'

"My friend looked at me after she had spoken. 'I'm afraid it's true, you know. Had a good old nanny, who didn't take to Lionel, and she saw him do it. Told dad, and we were sent off to separate schools. If it hadn't been for an open scandal and mother's weeping, I think it might have come out in the open. As it was, dad made him see some alienist or something: they were just coming in then. I've seen the medical reports. Chap said he could do nothing with Lionel, nothing at all, and would be afraid to try. Fact is, I've never felt quite safe while he was nearby. Sounds silly, but Isobel and I have no kids, which makes him heir. Rotten thing to suspect your own brother, but he's been such an all-round bloody piece of work....' His voice trailed off.

"'That's the oldest of all crimes,' I said in a tight voice, 'murder for a throne or title. If you get away with it, it's called *rebellion.* One thing is clear to me, and that is that all your present troubles have started since your brother came on the scene. To my knowledge, and I'd like this confirmed, there has never been any trouble of any even vaguely supernatural nature in this house, or around it, until recently?'

"Isobel looked at James. After all, it was *his* house. He shook his head, finally. 'No,' he said, 'I can think of nothing. I expect I would have heard, too. I used to be awfully put down about it as a kid at school, come to think of it. All the others had places with Anne Boleyn or someone walking, and Cavaliers on the battlements. When they asked me, I had nothing to tell them, not even a monk or headless serf, or whatever. No, Donald, there has never been anything of the kind here.'

"I could only take refuge in silence. Poor devil, if my slowly coalescing ideas were correct, he was about to get an overabundance of all the things he had treated so lightly!

"We dined early. There was little conversation, and that was of a nature which omitted any discussion of what we were awaiting. Traheal came up the stairs with me,

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and I knew that, on his part, it was no accident. 'Well, sir,' he said hoarsely, 'have you got some idea now of what we are going through?'

"I stared at him, not out of any class consciousness, I assure you, but simply because my thoughts were elsewhere. Then, I realized that a good man was asking for information.

"'Yes,' I answered bluntly. 'I think the whole thing centers around his lordship's brother. What do you think?'

"The blaze of anger on his face surprised me, though it should not have done so had I thought. After all, Lord Lionel had grown up in these parts.

"'I knew it,' he said. 'Just what I've been telling the rest of them. There's black evil, and he's the man to bring it. Sir, when he was even a little child, he was *wrong*. We all knew this! The Earl, God bless him, never could see what his brother was like... but we could! My father was of the opinion that he was mad! All the servants used to watch him when he was young, so that he was never unobserved. We all felt that he would do his lordship an evil. And he tried, sir.' He looked at me in a questioning way, as if debating what else he could tell me.

"'I know about the ground glass,' I said in answer to his look. 'I shall do my utmost to protect the Earl and Countess, yes, and you all as well. But I may need help. If I am right, there is a most ancient malignancy gathering around this house, yes, and one which seems to be gaining strength.' Looking back from this distant point in time, it seems the maddest conversation ever held between a guest at an English country house and its dignified butler! But, you know, after what we had seen it seemed quite normal, in the context.

"I continued: 'By the way, Traheal, did you know the two men Lord Lionel employs were Bretons? I am told that their language is very close to the original Cornish. And I think Lord Lionel doesn't want this known. Do you make anything of that?'

"He paused in the act of opening my door, his face thoughtful. 'We used, back in the old smuggling days, sir, to have a lot to do with the Bretons. Long before my time of course, but I've heard many tales from the older folk. There was a lot of intermarriage among the sailors, back in Napoleon's day and earlier, my granny used to say. Most of us have some Breton blood in us, if you can believe the stories. And they do say, too, that a Cornishman could understand them, and vice versa, those of us who used the old talk, mind you. But there's none of them left now that speaks it any longer.' He

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paused, still thinking, or rather, trying to recall some thought. 'I don't know, Captain, that we have much in common any longer. This is King Arthur's land, you know, sir, and I do seem to remember somewhere that the Bretons lay some claim to him, too, some old stories about him living there or something. Maybe that's how the languages got to be the same? They tell us now, Captain, that there was no such King and that the whole thing was a made-up tale of some old writer.' He laughed, his rosy countryman's face clearing. 'You'll never get a Cornish man or woman to believe that, now. Why, to us the King over there in London, and a fine man he is, meaning no disrespect, I assure you, he's a new chum compared to *our* king.' His face sobered as he turned to go back downstairs. 'Those two rogues may be Bretons, though I'd hate to claim kinship to such ill-looking scoundrels. But I'll leave you with this, Captain. If those two are Lord Lionel's men, then they're also black evil. None but the worst would willingly do *his* bidding!'

"He left me with a good deal more than he thought to mull over. A missing piece had dropped onto my puzzle table, though one I could not yet fully assess. The Pendragon! The great king of legend, and the savior of what was last and best in Celtic Britain! Arthur, the most towering shape in the mist of legend, the greatest of folk heroes in Western Europe! Was he a last Roman, as some have postulated, an inspired commander of heavy cavalry? One theory I had read made him *Dux Brittanorum,* the British war leader left behind by the last Roman garrison to save what vestige of civilization he could from the barbarism reaching out of the north and west. Another school thought him to be *Comes Littorae Saxoni,* the Count of the Saxon Shore, and thus the guardian of the east coast against the migrating hordes from the dark German forests, pagans and sacrificers to the blood-stained idols of the vast Hercynian forest.

"All accounts agree on a few points, though many of them have become cause for laughter in our present state of so-called enlightenment. Arthur was a Christian, and he fought the sorcery of his enemies with spiritual powers of his own. He was aided by at least one white wizard, usually called Merlin, but sometimes Blaize, or other names. Discounting the Round Table, Galahad, the Sword in the Stone, and other such trimmings, one was left with a series of desperate battles, against diverse foes, such as that of Mount Badon, and final defeat at the hands of....!

"I opened my window and leaned against the shutter, staring

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out into the swirling mist. Could this be the solution to my riddle? If it was, Avalon House was a nexus, a focal point for an historic crime, a crime of the immemorial and incredibly antique past. Was it now in the process of re-creation? What was Lord Lionel Penruddock, a man of the foulest antecedents, with a limitless potential for evil, doing in that slag heap without a name out there on the cliff? What was he *digging* for?

"I stared out into the dark, my eyes trying to pierce the wraiths of mist and fog, down to the nameless castle on the rock promontory of that ocean-bound crag. The night was silent, save for the distant murmur of the Atlantic surges against the Cornish shore. Yet I felt, somehow, that far to the west something was stirring, out beyond human sight or the reach of human kind at all. I looked absently at my watch. It was eleven thirty. More time had gone on than I had realized, as I had stood there trying to see light where there was none to see, trying to read sense into a matter so strange that a mention of it in most places would have been grounds for accusations of insanity! It was well for us that no one at Avalon House had returned a second time for help from the police! This battle, for that was how I saw it, had to be fought by us alone, and our antagonist was a man with strange weapons at his command. If I were right, they might be weapons against which we would find ourselves powerless.

"I was about to close and bar the windows when I heard the sound in the night. Far off, to the south, I felt sure, echoing through the mist, came the high, shrill whinnying of a horse. Now, all the horses, the some half-dozen there were, belonging to the estate, were stabled and shut in tight at sundown. So too, with the sheep and cattle. And nothing lay to the south but miles of empty cliff and moor, with no habitations or roads. Save for the cliff cottage.

"And the castle, if that were truly ever a habitation. And anything that issued from that gloomy pile meant this house and all in it no good. Whatever was coming, and I knew in my bones that it *was* coming, was advancing from there. I knew this also, just as I knew that midnight was fast approaching.

"Then I heard it again, a high-pitched neighing, which got all through my bones, nearer that last time and coming fast. That nickering cry was *wrong* in some way I could not define. No normal horse would have made such a sound, nor indeed, could have done so.

"At the same time the mist began to swirl and part. It was a cloudy night, and the stars and

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moon were still hidden. But the ground mist was being shredded, and I heard, far off, the first faint moan of a wind, off in the uttermost west. And almost, so faint I could hardly catch the tremor of a scent in my nostrils, I seemed to smell the delicate perfume of apples. It seemed to give me hope, though why I did not know, and it also spurred me to action.

"I hurled myself out the door and raced down the corridor toward James' and Isobel's bedroom. They had to be roused at once.

"The door was opening as I arrived, and James stood there, fully clothed, with his wife behind him. Like myself, they had not undressed, but on his feet he now wore boots, instead of the evening slippers he had worn with his dinner clothes.

"Her face was pale and frightened, though she was striving hard to conceal it. But his? The quiet, placid face of the country squire that I knew was utterly gone. He was a big man, and suddenly a most formidable one as well. His face was set like flint, in a brooding but awesome expression, one I had never seen before and I expect no one else had either. He looked steady as a rock and just as hard to move, but it was more than that. Above all, the impression was regal, in the old sense of the word, that of a great ruler and master of men, one who controlled destiny and was never its plaything.

"And as I stared transfixed at this new and mighty visage, there came from outside in the night the sound of the rising wind and over it the neighing of whatever it was out there masquerading as a horse!

"James turned and gently, without a word, pushed his wife back into the room. I caught one glimpse of her white face before the door closed. Then he turned back to me and stared hard at me for a second, as if in assessment.

"'He has loosed the Hunter upon us,' he said. 'Do you dare face him, and perhaps worse?' His voice was as strange as his expression had been to me, being deep and sonorous, with each word carefully chosen, as if he were speaking a language which was somehow not his, but a recently acquired tongue.

"I could only nod, for somehow speech seemed out of place, or else my tongue simply would not function in my dry mouth.

"He seemed to understand and laid on hand on my shoulder. 'Then come,' he said, 'Follow and ask no questions for there is no longer time. We must go and face this thing at its lair. What has been summoned must be laid to rest or it will come again and that must not be.'

"In silence, I followed him

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down the dark stairs and into the great silent hall. The clouds had parted outside, and through a mullioned window came just enough fitful moonlight to show us the way. The moaning of the wind had risen once more to gale force, but over it we could hear the neighing bray of whatever ranged the night, and ever and anon the sound of its hooves, beating a sinister tattoo as they galloped to and fro in the dark and storm.

"A patch of moonlight rested on one wall, and one could see the glimmer as it lighted on the various ancestral weapons which hung there. They ranged from trophies of foreign wars in the East, to mementos of Cavalier and Roundhead, and even older things, Lochaber axes, Scottish broadswords and claymores, with naval cutlasses of various times interwoven in the pattern.

"James moved to the wall and studied it for a moment, then reached up and unhooked a great Scottish broadsword, a thing most men would have needed two hands to swing, though he held it lightly enough in one.

"He turned to me, his face as grave as before and said, very simply, 'Choose.'

"As I hesitated, he added in the same slow, stately way, 'We must use fire or steel. The newer things will not help against that which walks the night. The servants and the woman sleep. They cannot face what we must. Choose!"

"This last was in a tone I could not resist. Nor did the mention of his beloved wife as 'the woman' rouse me to rebellion. Someone else had taken over command, and my business was to obey.

"I stepped over and peered up at the great wall. My hand went out to a blade as if led, and d'you know, the thing I had grasped almost seemed to leap into my hand. The minute I felt the hilt, I knew what I had, for I had handled the weapon in admiration a day or so earlier. It was a long, straight cut-and-thrust, with a basket hilt, made for some remote Elizabethan ancestor by the great Andrea Ferrara himself. I had been handy enough with the saber at Woolwich and later at Oxford. I could have chosen nothing better.

"'A good choice,' rang out the deep voice at my side. 'A noble sword indeed, though lighter than is my use to wield. Now, let us on to the contest. We face the first challenge and perhaps not the lightest!'

"Grasping the great weapon in his right hand, he strode down the hall and, freeing the bolts, flung open the great oak doors to the storm of wind and to whatever it was I knew waited for us in the night. Out beyond the portico we went, with me three paces behind.

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"Facing the darkness, he called above the storm in a voice like rollthunder. 'Come and do battle, Hunter! You have no place here now! You and your kind were banished to the hills and under them, far back in the lost ages. You have no power over men of trust. I speak for Christ and defy you and all your pack. No longer should you roam the land and bring fear to the lost and the helpless in the dark! Come out, I command, on that horse I overthrew once and shall again!'

"And over the storm and the moaning winds, came an answer! Out of the night came a wild cry, a long rising sound, which pierced the noise of the wind as if it were not there. I could distinguish no words, but the tone was enough. In it, I heard defiance and anger, and something else, a kind of emptiness, as if whatever spoke were wracked with lost hopes and challenged us from bleak despair as well as dreadful hate.

"The moon had vanished for a second or two behind a cloud, and we stood in the dark, facing nothingness. In front of us and quite close, I heard the sound of a hoof, then another. Something was advancing on us and we were sightless!

"The Earl stood, his sword in the guard position, solid as one of his own great gnarled oaks. I raised my own blade, though I could see no target. I felt a sudden chill, which seemed to cut through me like a knife. Then the clouds parted and the pale moon burst through and gave us light. At the same time, the gale from the west seemed to stiffen, and I caught again the sweet scent of apples.

"In front of us, no more than ten yards off, was the outline of a great horse. Its color was a white, an opaque, shifting shade, so that it seemed almost without color at all. Its eyes were the same shade and showed no glint or light. And on its back, saddleless, it bore a rider.

"He was as dark as the horse was light, and seemed clothed in furs of a tight fit, which caught the fitful moonlight and trapped it, giving nothing back. His head was bare, with shaggy hair, and rising from it were two forked projections, as if somehow he had made a cap from the upper cranium of some strange deer. I could not see his face at all, but the flicker of red points came from the place where his eyes should have been. In one hand he held a great barbed spear, and this he now raised to shoulder height.

"I sprang forward as fast as I could for I knew I was not the target, but I was too slow for the cast.

"The feeling of cold sharpened suddenly and terribly, and something long and lightless flew toward

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my companion's breast. His long sword flashed in the moon gleam, and there was a crash, as of riven metal. A nimbus of flame curved about his great blade and was gone.

"The light died as the racing clouds once more covered the white moon. Out of the pitch-black air in front of us came that wild cry again, despairing and lost now, its defiance gone, leaving only loneliness and utter wildness.

"'Begone!' shouted James in that great roar. 'Seek the under hills and lie quiet! On the earth your time is done and your power gone from the world. I command you, get hence and never return!' He held the great sword in both hands with the cross guard facing out.

"The moon came through the clouds again. Before us was... emptiness! The twin shapes of the strange steed and its night-gaunt of a rider had vanished as if they had never been. And around us the mighty winds raged as if in salute, roaring in bursts that sounded like my friend's new voice when he gave commands.

"'Come,' said James, his call sounding clear over the storm. 'We need mounts, so to the stables. The Hunter has lost his power, save against the frightened, and he and his were put down long ago. But this raising of the long-gone is an evil thing and perhaps not the worst. We must go and seek out our enemy in his lair. We must ride to the Caer Dhub, the Fortress of the Dark, and our time is short!'

"I had no argument, indeed I was eager to obey. I was not master here, and I had no purpose of my own any longer, except to serve as best I could. But if I were no more than a pawn, at least I was a willing one, and I raced behind James at my best speed.

"The horses were wild with excitement when we reached the stables, plunging and rearing in their stalls. But James gentled two down in a most marvelous manner, speaking to them in some language I had never heard before. Where he had learned it, I had no idea. But this new James was not the man I knew, and strange tongues were a part of this whole nightmare.

"We saddled up quickly and in a few minutes had ridden out into the full force of the wind. We took the track which led south to the cottage on the cliff, our way marked out by the intermittent moonlight. James galloped in front, an extraordinary figure in his black dinner clothes with trousers stuffed into hunting boots. I wished that I had had time to get some, but my patent leathers were better on horseback than they would have been to walk in. Like him, I carried my sword across the saddle.

"We thundered on through the

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night, often in sight of the sea, which was beaten to a fury by the wild and howling wind. The gale actually seemed to be still rising, and had we wished to speak, it would have been quite impossible through its shrieking and raging. It tore at us, too, so that we had to crouch over the horses' necks, and they, poor beasts, had to angle themselves against it. But they bore us nobly and never faltered.

"Now on our right I glimpsed a single light. It was one of the windows of the cottage, gleaming through the dark. But our way did not lie there, I sensed, and James never drew rein. Our path was south, south to the grim ruin on the headland, which James had called the Fortress of the Dark. It was from this that all the portents had come, the threats and the wickednesses had been unleashed. It was in that nighted wreckage that some foul sorcery had been revived, and it was there that we must seek its sources, yes, and destroy them.

"I had lost my sense of direction by now, but James cantered on through the bracken and heath, and I simply followed him. Suddenly he put up his left hand, at the same time checking his mount. He gestured to me to draw rein beside him. When I came up, he leaned so close that his mouth was almost on my ear.

"'We are very close now,' he shouted over the wind's howl. 'We must leave the horses and go to battle on foot. They are of no use to us and they have carried us bravely. We shall let them go and they will take no hurt. Dismount now and follow.'

"I did as he bade and gave my beast a pat on the flank, dismissing it. Both of them cantered back the way we had come, and we were left alone in the night and the storm. In silence we advanced, with me once more backing James. We angled into a gentle downward slope, and now the bellowing of the sea grew louder in front of us as we approached the coast. It had not yet rained through all this storm of wind, but now my face grew damp and I tasted salt. The spray of the Atlantic was being flung hundreds of feet up through the sheer force of the driven air.

"The moon broke through another cloud, and there, downslope, was the ancient fortalice, exposed in all its shattered and titanic wreckage before us. Nor was this all. Two squat shapes were crouched not a hundred feet away, staring in our direction as if awaiting us. As we stood mutually exposed, they rose to their feet and, with wild cries in their harsh speech, rushed at us. One carried a great ax, like a woodsman's but larger, while the other had a stranger weapon, a thing like a

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great rounded hammer, large enough to need the strength of both arms to wield. Lord Lionel might have expected no danger, but he had, nonetheless, left his two guardians.

"It was over in seconds. James took the one on the right with a great sweeping blow, a blow which shore through his ax shaft like paper and drove deep into the fellow's chest. He crumpled up like a felled tree.

"The other swung his huge maul, or hammer, at my head, a swing that would have spattered my brains to pulp had it landed. I ducked under it, though I felt the air move in my hair, and extending my body, left hand on the ground, drove the Ferrara point straight through his heart. He stood for one instant, his face contorted, then fell transfixed to lie by his mate. I wrenched loose the blade and stood up. James was facing me, a look of stern approval on his face. 'A good stroke,' he said briefly. 'Now follow, once more. The last test is to come and it will be far more dangerous than what has gone before. Be silent and keep watch, especially to the rear. We go into the dark, the true dark now, to speak with the master of these creatures.'

"We were both damp with our exertions and the wind-driven spray, up-welling from far below. But I felt no sensation of cold as I walked behind James in the direction of the fortress. Instead, I felt, despite the storm and the bleak surroundings, a sense of high resolve, almost of exhilaration. I felt myself part of a crusade, and yet certainly a stranger one never existed, consisting of two Englishmen in dinner clothes, armed with swords unused for many centuries!

"We crossed the bare wet rock around the site, and James headed unerringly for the spot where I had seen the cavity and its protruding ladder the previous day.

"In the flashes of moonlight we had no trouble picking our way over the rubble and soon the black cavity lay before us. The ladder was still in place.

"'Listen,' said my friend, pausing above the opening, one hand uplifted. Faintly, above the great noise of the wind and the raging sea, I seemed to hear a far-off throbbing, a beating pulse, as if from some mighty drum deep in the earth. I had no need to ask whence it came.

"'He is there. Still he works his crimes, still conspires with things that never see the light of day. So be it. He has found that which should not have been disturbed until the end of time. And from it he gains power even now. If we wait longer, matters will grow worse.'

"We two stood now in the lee of a broken wall, whose vast slabs cut

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off some of the force of the gale. His face was very grave, as he seemed to muse on things beyond my comprehension, leaning on the pommel of that giant sword.

"Then he looked up at me, strangely as if in doubt, not of me, I thought, but of something else, perhaps even of himself. 'We must go down. But my strength is less in the shadows under the earth, and his will be more. Let us go now, before I weaken further, from doubt and lack of faith. I will go first. Remember, have an eye to the rear and to the sides!'

"With no more ado he seized the first rungs of the ladder and began to go down. I waited and, when I could no longer see his hands, began my own descent, gripping the sword with two fingers and using the rest to cling to the ladder.

"The ladder was a long one, perhaps twenty feet. When my shoes touched rock, I was glad to stand up and look about. James was next to me, peering down the long tunnel in which we now stood. For there was light. Ten paces off, set in a niche in the wall of undressed stone, a kerosene lantern burnt with a dim glow. It was as if the light were changed down here in some way, for the color was odd, a pale light, like marsh fire in a summer bog. Far down the long shallow slope of the tunnel, another spot of similar hue shone in the distance.

"Remembering his warnings, I turned and looked back the other way. Here, the rock floor leveled off, as if we stood at the top of a slope; but here were no lights. Yet I had the feeling that the tunnel did not end near us at all but ran on for unguessable distances through the heart of the hills.

"Raising a finger to his lips, James led off down the gentle slope, his huge blade at the ready. I came behind in equal silence, listening as hard as I was able. Down here, out of the sound of the storm, the silence seemed muffled, but also echoing, so that the faint scuff of our feet rang abnormally loud in my ears. The faint throbbing beat we had heard on the surface had fallen silent as we had come down the ladder, but now it resumed again, louder and louder as we progressed. Then it halted once more, and the silence closed in upon us. We were now some few paces past the second lantern, still descending, and in the remote distance was the glowworm flicker of yet another light.

"All at once, on our left, there loomed up the opening of a huge passage, whose arch was far larger than the one we trod. We listened tensely, but I could hear nothing at first except the faint sound of dripping water some way off in the

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distance. Concentrating hard, I began to hear something else, or thought that I did. It was a sliding sound, as if something like wet hose were being dragged over a rock. It stopped, and I could only hear the drip of moisture again, but from James' taut face I fancied I had not been mistaken.

"'If we go on,' he whispered, 'we will have things behind us as well as before. Be twice vigilant.' He turned and moved off again, with me still in his wake.

"As we reached the third of the lights, a distance I estimated of some hundred of yards, I began to be conscious of yet another sound. This was a faint roaring, more of a vibration to be *felt*, rather than something caught by one's ears. It was not loud, but constant, as if it were coming through the rocks all around us, and it, too, seemed to emanate from in front, the direction in which we were advancing. James heard it also and turned to face me.

"'We are almost under the sea face,' he whispered in my ear. 'You hear the ocean as it strikes the cliff. There may be a chance still. I had hoped for this.'

"What he hoped for escaped me. This whole episode had taken on the quality of a waking dream in which I felt myself a spectator as well as an actor. I could do nothing except follow and await events, in some world of which I knew nothing, except that it, and James as well, had taken over control of my actions, shaping them to suit themselves.

"We had passed the last light long since, but now ahead of us we saw something new. The tunnel took a sharp bend to the right, and the rock floor no longer sloped at all. From around this bend came a lurid glare, far stronger than the lantern gleam. As we halted to watch, the throbbing boom we had first heard burst out once more, but this time far closer. If it were not some sort of drum, then I had never heard one.

"James motioned me on and led the way cautiously. As we approached, I saw the mouth of still another tunnel opening on our left, just before the bend. It had been hidden from us as we approached by a shallow buttress or stone, which thrust from the tunnel wall. We listened as before, but could hear nothing. But from its mouth came a vile reek, a stench of decay which turned the stomach. It was the awful smell which had so sickened the people at the Avalon House, and I felt sure this was its origin. We moved slowly past the hole and more slowly still to the turn of the passage. Reaching this, we halted and peered around it. I dropped to one knee, with James over me so that we offered as little

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of a target as possible to any observer.

"What we saw was this: we were staring into a cave or vault, which arched to a high point in the center. It was roughly oval in shape, but appeared to be man-made rather than natural, for its proportions seemed shaped and fairly symmetrical, if rough. It was perhaps three hundred feet in circumference.

"Around the walls were dark alcoves at regular intervals, and between the alcoves rough stone benches had been hacked out of the wall material itself. In the center was a great rectangular block of smooth black stone, unadorned but polished to a glossy sheen, from which the evil light glanced back and glimmered on the walls about. The light itself came from a fire which had been lit just in front of the block itself and on our side. It seemed to be of ordinary logs, but the flame burned with a greenish glow and not the orange of a normal blaze. Smoke swirled about the place, but most of it was carried upward as if by some draught, and I thought there must be a chimney of some sort up above in the viewless center, out of our sight. Between us and the fire, with his back to us, stood a man.

"He seemed to wear a long dark robe and was bareheaded. In the light of the fire I could just see that the robe had reddish symbols or shapes of some sort on its back, but what they were I could not make out. The figure rose to its full height, arms extended over its head, and made some signs in the smoky air. The drum beat sounded louder as if in answer. But where was the drum?

"The sound seemed to come from off to my right someplace. I could not see into the black pits of the alcoves, which the firelight did not reach, and the drumbeat apparently came from one of these.

"Now the figure which postured before us began to chant, a long singsong, in some speech unknown to me. The voice was high and strident, and the sound cut through the drum song and seemed to reach a long way as if carrying to unguessable reaches of space and time. The drumming halted for a second and then resumed, louder and more menacing than before.

"James lowered his head to where I crouched. 'Watch here, as I have told you. I must face what comes alone. Your task is to ward my back, unless I call. God give us strength, and His Son as well!'

"He rose, head erect, and while I watched in awe, he marched straight down into that ghastly chamber, his boots ringing on the rock, his sword loose in his great right hand.

"The figure in front of that

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grim altar, if that was what it was, whirled as it caught the sound, holding out its hands as if to hold off danger. And a strange sight he was.

"It was Lord Lionel, of course. What we had thought was a robe, was a long cloak, fastened about his neck with a jeweled clasp. Under it he wore a shirt of some coarse stuff that looked like frieze, and below that again a kilt of dark material, falling to just above his knees. On his legs were cross-garters, and his feet bore soft leather shoes, laceless and reaching to the ankles. He might have been garbed to play Hamlet on the stage, even to the curved dagger thrust into a gem-studded belt.

"But there was no playacting here. Even I, who loathed the man, had to admit he looked magnificent. It was as if these were his true clothes, the ones for which he had been born. His lank hair was bound back by a fillet of dull purple, and under it his eyes blazed in his chalk-white face. I read surprise, but that faded and was replaced by the raging hatred I had seen before, the fury of a demon unleashed. As he glared, the drum faltered and fell silent, and once more I heard about us the muffled roar of the Western Ocean. There was an atmosphere of waiting. I felt a wave of cold, alien and charged with malice, coming from the right of the room where the unseen drummer must lurk in the shadow of one of the niches.

"It was James who broke the silence. He took three more steps, which placed him to the left of the fire, forcing his brother to turn also and giving to me full view of both their profiles. The Earl's was calm, with the brooding calm of majesty which I had earlier noted. His strange garb in no way detracted from his towering good looks, and I felt that any clothes would have meant nothing. He was what he was now, and clothes were extraneous.

"'I have come to end it,' his voice rumbled out. 'I know why you are here and what you have summoned. The Hunter has been sent back to the hills, from whence only your vile arts could have roused him. Your servants, the spawn of ancient and black sorcery in the dolmens and monoliths of the lost, sunken lands of Brittany, lie dead over your head. I know, too, who seeks to be free, with his night wandering and frightening of the countryside. I know, too, how he is to be freed and what a price you will pay for it. Not even a thing like you, with your years of foreign delving into that which should have been long forgot, I say, not even you can fully know what it would cost you, and the world as well, if what sleeps here would once more come into full life!'

"The hatred left Lionel's face

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for a moment to be replaced by wonder. It was a shock to hear his despised brother, I think, whom he had held in such contempt for years, challenging him on his own ground and, yes, with such a wealth of apparent knowledge. Then his face hardened.

"'You think to defy me?' he shouted incredulously, '*me,* with that stupid sword? You break in here, to this place of the most ancient mystery in the aisles, the cavern of the Dark Prince, where lies his tomb? You bring that cretin in the door to attack *me,* who have sought for the knowledge of this place the world over? It is you who are mad! In the name of the Lost One who lies here, I defy you!' You have a sword, have you! Well, look on this then, you whom all the world call my brother! Look on the ax of him who lies here, laid in his tomb by the faithful, when he was cheated of his rights by the Christ-worshipers in that last battle, when dying he took with him the enemy of all his hopes!' He rattled out a string of uncouth syllables, and once more that horrid drum began to pulse from its hiding place.

"Lionel had crouched at the base of the great ebon block, which I had thought an altar but which now appeared in its true light. It was a mighty catafalque. I could barely make out the faint, time-scored line of the massive lid.

"When Lionel rose, he had thrown off his cloak and in his left hand carried a great ax, double-headed, with lunate curves, its somber blades giving back no more light than the tomb at whose marge it had lain. On his right forearm hung a small round shield, of apparently the same metal with a spiked boss in the center. A grim and dangerous figure he looked as he circled the black, basalt-hued block and moved in, seeking an opening. I strained to join in, for the shield gave him a deadly advantage, and James had no such defense.

"But I had been given a charge, and I knew I could not yield to impulse. As the drumming rose in volume, I stole a glance over my shoulder to the tunnel at my back. It was well I did.

"Something as pale as white bone was creeping up on me, indistinct in the fire's murky light. I caught a glimpse of long thin arms, the fingers ending in huge claws, a face like a starved baboon's skull, all bone and yellowed fangs, with two eyes of opaque flame, pupilless and blinking. That I had turned at the last moment was luck, if anything was due to luck on that mad night. I think even the dim glow of the evil fire slowed the monster down, for whatever cavern it had stolen from must have been utterly without light.

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"As it snarled hideously and rose from a crouch, I turned and lunged straight at that countenance of hell, between the orbs of pale phosphorescence it used for eyes.

"The blade bent, as the good steel struck something hard, and a shock ran up my stiffened arm to my shoulder. Even as I struck, I heard the clash of steel behind me and knew that James fought his enemy even as I.

"The foulness in front of me screamed, a high whining note which hurt my eardrums, and drew back in a scuttling lope, deeper into the dark of the tunnel. I thought I had struck its skull and knew that I had hurt but not killed it. I, too, drew back to the entrance of the huge cavern. I could not win a fight with that lurker in the shadows without light of my own, protecting James' back came first in any case.

"The thing screamed again and once more came at me in that queer scrabbling way, low to the ground. I had backed almost out of the tunnel now, and the thud-thud of the devilish drums rang in my ears, mixed with the clatter of blows as ax met sword. Now, I had room for a cut and I used it.

"Once more, that unclean head came into the light. The spiderlike arms covered with pallid hairs groped for me. The fangs slavered and it crouched for a spring

"I cut down and hard, the sweep beginning over my shoulder, and my aim was true. This sword was no courtier's rapier, but the long heavy blade of a soldier, and it bit into that bone, if bone it was, high on that unnatural head, and further yet, with a crunch I could feel down to my toes!

"For the last time I heard that eldritch cry, and as my blade came back to guard, stained with foul blood, the battle ended. Limping and swaying, the thing lurched back up the slope, clutching its mangled skull and wailing hideously, and vanished into the dark above. If I had not given it a death wound, then I had at least removed it from the board. It would make no more mischief that night.

"The ring of arms renewed made me wheel and look below. Here the war still raged and it was not going well. The dark man in the archaic dress was untouched and handling his ax and shield like a master as he circled and struck through the veils of smoke and the uncertain gleam of the fire. James was bleeding from a wound high on one shoulder, though his face was still calm and serene. But his sword was another matter. As he swerved in my direction, I saw that the broad blade was sorely battered, with many notches gouged into the edge. Even as I watched, he struck a terrible blow, which his brother took full on the blade of that grim

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ax. The weapons clashed together and neither gave an inch. But when James fell back into a guard position, holding the sword in both hands, point up, I saw a fresh notch, while Lionel's ax was untouched. The black metal of ax and shield had some awful power in them, perhaps a trick of forging long gone from the world.

"And he sensed his advantage. Over the rising, battering cry of that damned drum, he called out. 'This ax and shield were made with blood and torment under the hills, brother. Long the owner bargained for them and none could prevail against them! Yield now and I may show mercy!'

"'One weapon prevailed against them!' came the deep-throated answer. 'They were not victor at the last!'

"Circling again, Lord Lionel sneered. 'Seek in the Hesperides for that weapon, dear brother. It is gone long ages from the earth, as well you know!'

"The drum beat higher still, and the Earl's eyes blazed with blue fury. Lifting high his immense sword, he fell upon his brother's shorter shape and with a series of battering blows began to drive him about the cavern, from one side of the fire to the other. And this was his undoing.

"As Lionel retreated, giving ground but protecting himself beautifully, James slipped and with a tremendous stroke drove his sword down on the stone top of that forgotten tomb. There was a rending crack and three things happened. The sword shattered, close to the cross hilt. The slab of midnight stone also cracked in two, straight across the top, and the drum suddenly ceased. Lionel leapt back, confronting his defenseless enemy in triumph, and, shaking the ax, howled something in that unknown language.

"And the sound of the sea outside on the rocks burst into a shrieking bellow such as I have never heard even in the worst of Pacific typhoons. There was another crash, like thunder, but far harder, and then yet another. High on one wall of the cavern, across the tomb, there appeared a great crack. For an instant, light came through it and a great burst of spray. Another horrendous crash shook the room and the gap doubled in size. A gout of storm-tossed sea poured in with this blow and with something else."

Ffellowes looked around at all of us before he continued speaking, but we were as silent as the grave. The library fire had long since gone out, and we sat, intent, lit only by a small lamp in a corner of the bay.

"It was long and glittered," he said at length. "I could not really undertake to say what it was, even

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to this day. James stooped, groping on the floor, now inches deep. The next wave poured down through the gap, and the fire spat and went out. Only dim moonlight and that only at intervals now lit the vault.

"When I could see again, James was advancing on his brother, and high above his head gleamed something which caught the light with a blue flame.

"The light dimmed again, and Lionel screamed. There was another tremendous crash, but this time it appeared to come from *inside* the cave.

"For a second there was silence, save for the wind and the water, which was now sloshing about my ankles. The next surge broke through the shattered wall of the place, and as it did, in the dim light something glittering flashed through it and vanished into the wild night outside.

"'James,' I called uncertainly, 'are you all right?' I could see nothing and hear nothing but the elements pounding on and through the rock. The moon must have been behind a cloud. Suddenly his voice was in my ear, his huge hand under my elbow. 'Quick,' he shouted. 'We must run for it. The cliff is falling! Let me help you!'

"We ran. My God, how we ran. James must have been exhausted, but he was supporting me and wouldn't let go either. Before we reached the first lantern, rock was falling from the tunnel roof, and vast grindings were echoing down its length. I looked back as we passed and already the light was gone in a shower of stone and sand. Ahead of us, the next lamp gleamed faintly in the gloom, but rock was already crashing down between us and its flicker. The surging water would have caught us, I'm sure, had not the tunnel sloped up ever so gently, but I could hear that raging in the rear as well.

"Tripping and stumbling, we passed the second light. The groaning of the rocks was really something now, and cracks began to appear in the tunnel's floor. We had to vault a few but somehow always managed to keep staggering on.

"The next light was close now. As we passed it, a boulder the size of my head crashed down just behind us. An idea full of terror crossed my mind. Would we be able to see the tunnel entrance, the gap in its roof, should the moon not be shining? As it turned out we couldn't, but it didn't matter.

"I simply ran into the ladder, almost knocking my addled brains out. James made me go first, and I didn't argue. You know, I still had the Ferrara sword in one hand, dumb stubbornness, I guess, but I carried it out of that hellhole and later put it back on the wall myself.

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"As I climbed out, the moon came out again and flooded the landscape with pale light. But the groaning and cracking in the earth hadn't halted for a minute, and I was damned glad to see my friend's head appear at the top of the ladder. His face was pale and his eyes were half shut. It was I who grabbed him this time and hauled away until he was out of the hole. I got one arm under his shoulder and we lurched off away from the castle toward the east. One moment we were on the slippery rock of the point, the next we were on soft turf, and I never felt gladder of common dirt in my life.

"'Go on,' he gasped. 'We are not safe yet. I know!'

"Up the slope we went, more at a crawl than a walk, I may say, until neither one of us could go a step further, and we simply collapsed into the moist verdure of the hills.

"Behind us, the grandfather of all breaking noises cut loose and we sat up and stared. The whole great finger of stone on which the castle sat was separating from the land!

"Slowly, inexorably in the moonlight, the cliff leaned out and away. There were rending and screeching noises deep down in the earth, and even where we crouched, the ground shook as though with an earthquake.

"James stood up, and that stern look of majesty was never clearer in the moonlight. 'Accursed be thy stones forever!' he shouted over the shattering noise of the cliff fall. 'Lie in the sea bottom until the end of time and never trouble the world again!' As he spoke the whole promontory point, fortress and all, vanished, and a splash roared up like some vast water spout and left us drenched. When the water had left our eyes, a ragged cliff edge ran some dozen yards away from us. Beyond this there was... nothing.

" 'So passes *Caer Dhub*,' said James in a strange voice. 'So passes the last of an evil lost in time. And I too pass, yet I will...' He never finished telling me what he would do because he had fainted. I was nigh on doing so myself, being exhausted as well as dripping wet. But someone had to get back to Avalon House, or else we would both die of exposure.

"I covered him with my jacket and in my soaked, boiled shirt, or the remnants of one, began to stumble over the faint trace Lionel's people had left on the slope. I don't know how long I had been putting one foot down after the other when I saw lights ahead and heard voices. I called out in a croak like that of an asthmatic frog and they heard me. I remember hands holding me up, but nothing more. Apparently I managed to tell them about James

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before I passed out, but I remember none of it, not until I woke up in my own bedroom at Avalon.

"I lost a whole day there, I later discovered. They found us at about four a.m., and I woke to an afternoon sun going down *two* days after that! That's what I call needing a rest, eh?

"Well, I got myself up and dressed and wandered downstairs. And here are James and Isobel having tea! You would have thought I'd slipped away five minutes earlier to visit the w.c. With my head full of the last time I had seen James, I could hardly believe my own eyes!

"Of course they leapt up, James spilling his tea in the process, and fell on my neck. Isobel, I was glad to note, looked ten years younger already, her eyes shining and her cheeks with some at least of the old bloom.

"But James! Here was the man I had left three-quarters dead on a cliff after the damndest struggle in my memory, beaming at me in his old tongue-tied way, trying to get out something that made sense in terms of speech!

"'Can't thank you enough, old chap. I mean, dash it, you've been a trump to help us out this way! The lads on the place tell me you pulled me out of that damned landslide, the one that got old Lionel in the bravest way. I say, really, it was awfully decent of you. I can hardly recall a thing, must have been hit by a rock or something, what?' I was speechless.

"Even the old familiar voice was back, and the deep sonorous tones I had heard on that fatal night were gone forever. The clear boy's gaze which met mine was as untouched by trouble as a three-year-old's. Whatever had ruled my friend on that cliff and in that vault had left forever. From appearance, he might never have done anything rougher than a day's guard mount in front of Buck House.

"As I tried to think of something to say, a discreet cough came from the door. I looked up and there met Traheal's steady eyes. 'Very nice to see you up and about, Captain, speaking for myself and the staff. A very gallant thing you did, sir, saving his lordship like that. We all regret that poor Lord Lionel was lost in that tragic fashion, of course. No doubt he was trying to save them poor helpless men of his down below.'

"'Mmh, well, thank you, Traheal,' I said. So this was to be the pattern was it? 'I suppose, James, they were all down below? No hope of rescue? This awful weather of late, no doubt, loosened the cliff, eh?' No one can say *I* can't pick up a cue! I went on. 'Sorry as the devil about your brother. Hardly knew him, of course. Still wish to express

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regrets and all that.'

"But now the ball had moved to another court. It was Isobel who fixed her gaze on me.

"'Such a pity. Lionel was a very peculiar man, there's no denying it, but he *was* family. I've always said that all this digging about in odd places must make one morbid. I understand they often use dynamite or some awful explosive in these excavations. They must have been careless, that's all.' She paused, her blue orbs politely holding mine. 'At least, that's what the police think, isn't it, James?'

"'Ah, well, yes, I expect so,' mumbled her spouse. He turned to me, as if in appeal. 'You know, Donald, I honestly couldn't stand him, I mean frankly, but I do feel bad about all this. I should never have let him dig down there. The whole cliff must have been as rotten as cheese.' He sighed. 'At least that bloody old castle is gone with the slip up there, and that's a blessing.' He looked thoughtful, then turned to me again. 'Isobel thinks I must have had a premonition or something the other night when we rushed out there. I'll be blowed if I can recall it, but that's what she says and she's usually right about these things. But, I'll say this. Ever since I was a kid, I've had that old pile of slag on my mind, sort of hanging over me, what? I used to go miles to even avoid looking at it. At least that's gone for good, eh, my dear?'

"'Yes,' she replied very softly, 'that's gone for good. It's *all* gone and it won't be back. Why even that most unpleasant smell has left the cellars. And the weather is perfect again.' Cornflower-blue fixed me with the same level gaze."

Ffellowes paused and we all drew a long breath. He lit a cigar and I leaned back in my chair for the first time in half an hour. But another figure bounced up across from me. It was this guy Simmons, and if the signs were right, he was mad as hell.

"General Ffellowes!" he exploded. "I have never heard in my life a more preposterous farrago of fables! Do you expect me to believe this absolute tissue of — of fabrications? Are we all expected to believe that this monstrous mélange of Tennyson, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory happened to *you? In person?*" He turned on his heel. "I believe, sir, that you have done your best to ridicule me, to make me a figure of fun for some obscure purpose of your own! This piece of senseless vulgarity is beyond belief! I shall never set foot in this institution again! Never!" He stormed out, leaving the rest of us flabbergasted.

"Well, for Pete's sake," said someone. "Who was that nut, anyway? And why did he blow up like

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that? I sure hope he keeps his word about not coming back!"

"I don't get it," remarked Bryce. "He was the one who brought up ghost stories in the first place. Brigadier, that's one of the best stories I ever heard, and if you say it happened, it happened, at least in my book. But what got that character so stirred up? Any ideas?"

"Well," said Ffellowes, "yes, I rather think I do. His name is Simmons. I have been hearing for the past year or so about one Professor Elwyn Simmons at Columbia or somewhere, who is about to release the definitive work on the psychosis of witchcraft. It's supposed to be the latest word in debunking any belief in things nonmaterial, you know." He pulled on his cigar.

Bryce chuckled. "No wonder he got steamed up. Think he'll revise the book, sir?"

"I doubt it," said Ffellowes, "but I wish he'd stayed for the list of my friend's names. Like many very old families, the heir always gets handed a bundle."

"Such as?" I cut in.

"In James' case, aside from James, of course, he drew the following: Arthur, Geraint, Percival, Bedivere and Tristram." The ruddy face smiled at us.

For once my brain worked and back came a school English class on poetry. "And Lionel had only one initial, which might just have been M, right?" I asked.

"You have just won the coconut, as we say in Merry England," said the brigadier.

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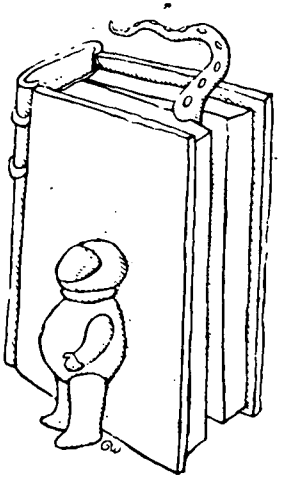
ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

The Best of John W. Campbell, Edited and with an Introduction by Lester del Rey. Ballantine, $1.95



Some say that current SF is best where it comes closest to the ideals of academe. Since almost all SF teaching is now institutionalized, and since most new SF writers are people who either studied SF writing or at least were not discouraged from reading SF in their formative years, and since there are now many "histories" of science fiction suitable for adaptation as textbooks, we will someday soon have a majority in favor of the proposition that newsstand science fiction — the thumb-rule product of skilled amateurs or their conscious imitators — is a despicable aberration, against which, thank God, suitable intellectual controls have now been re-established.

A few others say, with a certain grimness, that newsstand science fiction — "modern" science fiction — is the only pure quill, and that conscious, taught literacy is effete.

It's becoming increasingly obvious that we need a long, objective look at John W. Campbell, Jr. But we're not likely to get one.

When he was alive, Campbell was mind-numbingly complex but greatly influential because he could be seen taking major actions which could be labelled simply. Between 1932 and 1938 he made himself the co-equal of E.E. Smith among fabulists of technological

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optimism. "Superscience fiction" realized its full potential at his hands, and created a body of readers who, some years later, would include writers who sincerely believed that SF was technological in basis.*

At the very same time, he was incubating "Don A. Stuart," who, beginning with the short story, "Twilight," and then in a brief but energetic succession of other short work — there is no Stuart novel — set an example which shocked many of his colleagues into re-evaluating their fundamental ideas of what could be written as pulp magazine science fiction. And he created a body of readers who, some years later, would include new writers who believed the essence of good SF was moodiness and the inclusion of alien characters who talked like thanatopsical eighteenth century English gentlemen.†

In 1938, for his pains, he received the husk of *Astounding Stories of Super Science* and by 1940 could clearly be seen to be that almost nonexistent creature, an editor. Within the exact meaning, SF has never had another (all my good friends and acquaintances excepted, of course).

An editor is not so much a buyer, intercessor, revisor or promoter as a bellwether. It's good if this person can do those other things; doing them well makes such good and useful creatures as executive editors, managing editors, manuscript editors and associate publishers.‡ But an *editor*, without respect to genre, publication medium, market potential or previous training, is an individual who can establish a monopoly position within the minds of a sufficiently large body of contributors so that this position becomes the standard of excellence for that genre.

Within a small group of persons in our time — Harold Ross, Helen Gurley Brown, Hugh Hefner, Ben Bradlee, a very few others — Campbell stands as tall as any in that company.* None of them

*And Campbell the editor would agree with them, either because he fully believed it or because he felt it was his duty to say it.

†And Campbell supported them by buying their work.

‡By my lights, Hugo Gernsback's major accomplishments evolved from a role as publisher, using that noun as it is used today within most industrial and trade publication chains.

*Hefner is a funny duck. Famed for not being able to take his hands off any aspect of Playboy, he is actually the only one of this number who has successfully, repeatedly, delegated his concept without attenuating it, despite the personal disparities among Ray Russell, A.C. Spectorsky, and the present staff.

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could do the trick any better than he could. With minor exceptions, most of them insignificant, all newsstand SF between 1940 and about 1960 was either apparently Campbellian or, when not, consciously and sometimes painfully not.

Galaxy's entire early success was founded on giving relief to writers who hadn't been able to live with Campbell or live without him. When that freshet was exhausted, so was Horace Gold, its founding editor. (And one-time incessant contributor to F. Orlin Tremaine's version of *Astounding Stories,* under the pseudonym of Clyde Crane Campbell).

F&SF, as our name might indicate, was launched to satisfy Anthony Boucher's longing for Campbell's lost *Unknown.* The first issue was called, simply, *The Magazine of Fantasy.* It was a stablemate of what was then Mercury Press's *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* whose editorial taste ran to formal cerebration of the 'tec sub-genre. So Boucher, who lived very much in both worlds, with an additional *pied-a-terre* reserved in science fiction, established a certain special tone which this magazine has never lost. Nevertheless, it was Campbell who had founded *Unknown,* along with the idea that newsstand SF could fluently incorporate both pseudotechnological and magical fantasies from the imagination of the same basic set of contributors.

Thus the "Big 3" of newsstand SF in the 1950s. But until the 1950s Campbell operated alone upon the hearts and minds of his writers and of his readers, who firmly believed that any newsstand SF not in *astounding SCIENCE FICTION* was a sometimes interesting but always lesser sort of thing.*

Campbell's monopoly of ideas, techniques and thumb-rules thus extended itself to his own analytical faculties. If he understood it, it existed. Nothing else existed. To converse with Campbell for any length of time, it was necessary to make the same assumptions. Once made, they permitted a relationship either harmonious or not, but viable. But it was easy to baffle the man by bringing up anything he wasn't interested in, even if it were a legitimate offshoot of his current preoccupation. He would blink, frown, visibly mumble in his mind, and return the conversation to his topic. If you persisted, he would indicate not that you were wrong, or rude,

**Campbell neither read nor inquired into the work of the "competition," and accepted no credentials not generated within the Street & Smith adventure group publications such as* The Shadow, Doc Savage, *and of course ASF. The sole and not invariable exception was granted to contemporaries from the superscience days.*

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or flighty, but that you were improper.

The major features of his individuality were footed in a code of manners. Or, better, the concept that there was a code of manners somewhere, absolute and refined out to the last decimal place of objectivity, so that a gentleman's principal duty consisted of discovering and mapping it, guided by his increasingly educated basic instincts.

In that light, the emergence of moody, sometimes querulous, often eironiphilic Don A. Stuart from universe-wrecking John Campbell makes some sense. Superscience fiction demands protagonists of unwavering moral rigor; intelligences which at a snap can detect the essence of evil and bend all their energies to expunging its taint wholesale forthwith unrelentingly. The fast-action format requires it, just as it simplifies all interactions into Total - Good - versus - Total - Evil for the sake of plot celerity. This is the further consequence: Since the villains, to be convincingly dangerous, must be as technologically capable as the heroes, but the heroes win, the reader and writer must collaborate in the unspoken assumption that right and might are indistinguishable. The mightiest machine is the goodest machine.

An intelligent person producing this stuff for any length of time might well become filled with doubt, irritation, and a consciousness of the tricks that life arranges for us to play on ourselves.

There is a detectable specific link between the prewar economic depression and the nature of the "modern" science fiction of the 1940s. More specifically, there is a link between John W. Campbell, Jr., universe-wrecker, and John W. Campbell, Jr., editor — ie., 'universe-definer. That link is Don A. Stuart, child of the effect of the Depression on Campbell the writer of successful, comparatively lucrative pulp ficton of questionable aspiration and juvenile logic.

That effect clearly has something to do with the fact that Campbell's fresh bachelor's degree in technology was not convertible into accomplishment. The best he was able to do was find employment at the mechanical testing labs of the White Truck Corporation. That is dull work, and one assumes that like most other hands without advanced degrees or experience he was put to bolting test rigs onto stands and then charting dynamometer readouts. Or perhaps he was an assistant draftsman. Probably the most useful thing he brought to his employment was not his diploma but his three years' experience maintaining the hard-used Model A in which he com-

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muted from New Jersey to MIT before transferring to Duke. That will tickle your predilection for irony, particularly if you go home each night to the typewritten world in which Aarn Munro is king. Each day, I'd think, you'd devote intense time to planning obviously vital improvements in your ability to detect propriety.

Something was wrong. Some basic message was not getting through, despite all the sharp, powerful blows of intelligence which Campbell's bearlike mind could deliver against the trunk of any problem suspected of containing secret honey. Too many were turning up simply hollow.

It's not that I think Campbell deliberately created Stuart for the purpose of worrying at the problem of understanding problems. That's not how creation works. The thing lies there whimpering, staggers to its feet, blinks, looks about it at the sunlight and the meadow, and begins to try running. "Oh, *that's* what it was!" you say. Then, if you are inclined, you can search back in your memories and, provided you are capable of recalling even what you'd rather not, and where you've been that your Mommy might not approve of, you might be able to give an accurate guess as to what you mated with. Most people would rather think they've given birth to a totally new pure breed, or have a tendency to ascribe fatherhood to Zeus Piter (of course, in a necessary plastic disguise).

But Stuart was assigned the natural study of problems. Beginning with "Twilight" and throughout his career, Stuart dealt with or at least catalogued such questions as, for one, the effect on problem-solving Humanity of solving the problem of building problem-solving machines; for another, the situation in which the researcher is the last to realize the true practical value of his incidental discoveries; for a third the problem of not being able to recognize valid information on advanced information-gathering systems when equipped with inadequate means for evaluating information; for a fourth the problem of not being able to distinguish at any given moment between two statically identical affects, one genuine and one equally genuine but not immutable. Etc. It is also noteworthy that all Don A. Stuart stories can simply be described as allegories of failed communication.* Clearly, they come from some

**That includes Campbell's last story, "The Idealists," from* Nine Tales of Space and Time, *Raymond Healy, Ed., Holt, 1954. The byline is the byline of John W. Campbell, Jr., but the voice is the voice of Stuart. (And my thanks to Phyllis Eisenstein for tracking down this reference when my own library failed me).*

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single, though complex sector of the man's self-image, and probably represent his major intellectual preoccupation of the late 1930s.

When, in late 1938, he was given *Astounding* to work with, what we soon got was the result of a confluence of factors that had been in considerable tension. Goodbye White Truck (goodbye sheepskin, but hello, eventually, to a sober claim of being a nuclear physicist), goodbye, as though surgically, not only to John W. Campbell, Jr.'s superscience fiction, but to all superscience fiction except for that of E.E. Smith, Campbell's preceptor and only rival in that art, (but hello, eventually, to a long-term effort to make a "modern" science fiction writer out of the wonderful old man), and goodbye to "Don A. Stuart," the writer, (but Hello! Hallo! Halloo! to John W. Campbell, Jr., editor, preceptor, problem definer, who to the end of his days editorialized exactly as Stuart plotted, and who cuffed and snarled at his writers or charmed them with his great warm bulk, and drove them from tree to tree of his choosing, some of them no doubt thinking that they were simply cooperating with him, and that they were fully his equals, even if as yet slightly smaller versions of him).

Obviously, no one who knew him well enough to work for him at any length could have retained an objective view of him; the most we can hope for from that quarter would be a series of memoirs which, taken all together and read by some ideally situated observer, might distill down into some single resultant — which all its parents would disown.

A long-standing fact that is only emerging into common consciousness since his death is the really large number of major talents who could never relate to him or could work with him only at a distance, or lost their ability to work with him. Many of his rejects — either individual stories, or writers — *were* mediocre or bad. Many of his publications, and his contributors, *were* topflight. But such writers as Alfred Bester, Cyril Kornbluth, Frederik Pohl, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury, Damon Knight, Brian Aldiss, Philip José Farmer, Harlan Ellison and Philip K. Dick were able to work for him only under rare circumstances, if at all. Some, like Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon and Clifford Simak, drifted away. Some, like James Blish, tore themselves away.

And some of the people he'd been publishing right along, for one reason or another, were as mediocre or as bad as his rejects. He was not infallible; or, rather, his

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standards are not immediately perceptible by others.‡

But, obviously, no one who failed to feel his effect, or who rebelled against his effect, or lost interest in his effect, is apt to understand matters well enough to tell us exactly what he did and how he did it. At best, we'll hear he had feet of clay. How those feet are described by each expositor may eventually produce some sort of resultant.

This is no more than the difficulty history has with any major figure. But by its very nature, the dimension of the difficulty in some way measures the pervasive importance of the man. I think we are all still either with him or without him, though as time passes, and the period of his major influence — 1939-1949 — retreats, the proportions of Campbellianism and Null-campbellianism in SF become increasingly mixed, and increasingly mixed within its individual practitioners.

He was newsstand science fiction. Not because he controlled it, for it's becoming increasingly possible to show he did not, but because no one would have dreamed of attempting to show it at the time. Since there was almost no new library SF being generated at that time, with Wells past it and about to die, Huxley becoming visibly a salesman for himself,* Rand busy with *The Fountainhead,* Wylie reborn as an ass, Benet strictly a short story writer, and such postwar classics as *Mr. Adam* not yet unleashed upon a horrified world by the nuclear bomb, Campbell by default as well as by vigor had charge of all that was mightiest and most good about all of SF. In the world's eye, it was a particularly small province. But for many of us — that includes you and me — it was our home town, and on certain occasions we still get and attempt to reply to fragmentary messages.

So from where to begin to understand John Campbell? I would start with two novels: *The Black Star Passes,* and *The Moon is Hell,* and next I would go to *The Best of John W. Campbell.*

Lester del Rey knew Campbell well. But don't expect any defini-

‡*Campbell's criteria are unfathomable. His AnLab story popularity poll, for instance, was eventually used as a bonus-award input, bringing supplementary checks to high-ranking writers. With some writers, at least, he intermittently paid extra for particular stories as he bought them, and furthermore wanted to buy every word they wrote (until he read it, of course), even though they consistently placed very low in the AnLab reader preference ratings. The closest-to-home subject of that practice was myself.*

**As Campbell was about to do, but not yet, not quite yet.*

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tive or comprehensive analyses of JWC in the introduction. Les knows better than to attempt the impossible, and this restraint alone would make this book noteworthy, for it represented a golden opportunity for shooting off the mouth as I have done here. Instead, he gives a chronological account of Campbell's professional life, sticking to the established facts, accounting for the evolving nature of the stories collected here.

These begin with "The Last Evolution," offered as a sample of Campbell, Jr., superscience writing, and then progress through "Twilight," "The Machine," "The Invaders," "Rebellion," "Blindness," "Elimination," and "Forgetfulness" to "Out of Night" and "Cloak of Aesir," and finally "Who Goes There?" which is the finest SF suspense novella ever written. There is one editorial, to illustrate that side of John's work, and there is an afterword from Peg Campbell, the wife of his later years, who writes with great fondness and innate dignity.

Read simply as a book of entertainment, this is a Class A package. It is also, of course, a must item for anyone's Compleat Library.

It's striking that — as del Rey says, not in so many words — Campbell was sometimes a visibly workmanlike writer. The opening paragraphs of "Elimination" are ludicrous as literary technique. And his idea of what constitutes mood and feeling was derived not from life but from a book by someone else.†

But neither of these features makes any difference to Campbell's hard-driving storytelling ability, or to any reader's potential ability to enjoy this work. Except for "The Last Evolution," and a few text references to propeller-driven aircraft and that class of minor anachronism, nothing here would be remarkable if pubished for the first time today, except in the sense that it would be remarkably competent. If Don A. Stuart had never existed in this field, they would be dynamite, and sometimes beautiful.

So if you read this book, you will have the essence of what Campbell was able to do to his field as a writer. What he did to other writers — as an editor and as a grey eminence — is best found out by listening to them talk. Next month we're doing *The Early Pohl* and *Hell's Cartographers,* which is a collection of autobiographies by Robert Silverberg, Alfred Bester, Harry Harrison, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, and Brian Aldiss. You'll be able to listen then.

†The Red Gods Call, *by C.E. Scoggins. I suppose that being able to point to a single source, rather than to twelve years of exposure to literature courses, makes the difference between the pulp writer and the literatus.*

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Agapo was supposed to be the ultimate in weird California cults, and so Lukcic, graduate cultural anthropologist, headed into the mountains to find out what they were all about.

Life Among The Anthropologists

by RAYLYN MOORE

It was Fairfax, Lukcic's thesis adviser, who thought up the project. Fairfax called Lukcic into his office and said, "See here, Lukcic, if you're going to do any kind of definitive work on contemporary California cults you can't leave out Agapo. The things they do are supposed to be ten times weirder than anything that goes on up around Mount Shasta."

And Lukcic, who already had a dozen notebooks crammed with the latest poop on Group Enlightenment, Numerology, Scientology, preincarnation, Subud, Tarot, Satanism, astrology, Rosicrucianism, Rhine's ESP, and Yoga (including hatha, karma, raja, mantra, bakti, and purna), sighed and said, "Yeah. Uh, I keep catching rumors about Agapo but I can't figure where that group fits into the scene."

"They're syncretic."

"Yeah?"

"I mean to say, of course, eclectic. Fantastically eclectic."

"Yeah."

"Well, don't sit there waiting to pick my brains. I don't know any more, not even where to find them exactly except that they're up in the Santa Cruz Mountains somewhere. And that you have to be extra careful about approaching them. I'd leave home my concealable camera and taperecorder if I were you and park my car a mile off and walk in, pretend to be an already-converted disciple applying for acceptance as a group member. Then if I were so fortunate as to get that far without incident, I'd try to make myself small and not do anything, not even make the slightest gesture, that might be considered deviationist. I hear that's the main thing with them. Conformity."

"Yeah?" said Lukcic. "How do they deal with deviates?"

Fairfax shrugged. "How the

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hell should I know? That's your job to find out."

Then when Lukcic had left the office and was halfway down the hall, Fairfax stuck his head out and hollered, "I hear there's a blood ritual of some kind."

"Thanks," Lukcic said and kept on walking down the hall.

But he did exactly as Fairfax advised, parked the Land Rover what he judged was about a mile from where he'd been told by some hikers the camp was supposed to be. Then he'd gotten lost in the mountains so it had taken him most of the afternoon to cover that mile. He'd had no trouble getting in to the colony, though. There were no barriers, no gates, not even a lookout or sentry. The Agapans had all been preoccupied with what appeared to be routine chores or just loafing and goofing around, and no one had challenged his presence when he joined the circle at the fire. A few of the young women — and so far as he could see, they were all young — had looked up and smiled at him, but that was all.

So now he would have regretted the missing equipment and been doubly browned off at Fairfax's oldmaidish admonitory ditherings, except who needed equipment? There was nothing to photograph. Nothing to record.

Across the circle from him a blonde girl in an ordinary green cable pullover and a long skirt made of an old pair of bluejeans with calico inserts front and back was chopping vegetables, kneeling over a big butcherstore-type chopping block set on a stump. First she chopped up a bunch of leeks, then carrots, some celery, mushrooms, then something that looked like a parsnip, though Lukcic didn't recall ever having seen a parsnip and couldn't be sure. But the point was that the same girl could have been doing the same job in any suburban kitchen in Marin County, California. Or Westchester, New York. Or anywhere at all.

Evidently because the choppingblock was in use, the stew meat was being prepared another way. A second girl — redhaired and rather delicate seeming, similarly clad — lifted a big hunk of raw meat out of a wooden bowl where it had been marinating in a dark liquid. She attacked it with a pair of kitchen shears, cutting it first into strips, then into cubes, working messily above a second wooden bowl into which she let the cubes fall.

The meat when she'd first held it up had seemed to have the texture and glister of a beef liver, weighing maybe a couple of pounds. But after the cutting, the girl bent over the fire and dumped all the meat cubes into the big iron stewpot that had been heating there dry. There was a brisk sizzle, a vol-

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canic jet of steam, and a salivating aroma which made Lukcic change his mind and decide the meat wasn't liver but venison.

And, goddamnitall, here he sat like an ass, making these detailed mental notes on nothing relevant in the least. It wasn't a cookbook he was writing, it was a definitive text on — well, never mind that. What's one lost evening? Day, really. Perhaps two days before he'd be able to slip away and get back to Santa Cruz. Yet the necessity for "slipping" away in the same way he'd slipped in implied he'd be defecting with tribal secrets and might even be an object of pursuit or vendetta. Ridiculous. There didn't seem to be any tribal secrets.

Next events in order of their occurrence: the meat was cooked alone for a while, the cubes disturbed occasionally with a wooden paddle to assure browning on all sides, then a third female with shiny black hair in squaw braids came along with an armload of spice bottles and tossed in what were obviously pinches of dried herbs and a couple of cloves of garlic. Then the chopped vegetables were dumped in and an iron lid clamped down to collect the distilling moisture for gravy.

Great.

As a matter of fact, despite the involuntary stir of his juices when the meat first went in, Lukcic wasn't even hungry. He'd had a pile of tuna sandwiches in the Land Rover and had finished the last of them on his walk in to the camp, since he'd hated to toss them away and didn't want to be found with outside food on him in case things got as hairy as Fairfax thought they might.

It *was* true that after the stew making was finished, the atmosphere changed subtly. For one thing it was darker, the early autumn smoke-gray dusk having drawn in and turned a cool indigo, shading into black. A night wind shuffled through the faraway high tops of the redwoods. But there was also a less explicable heightening, a quickening, the genius loci making its presence felt. From the direction of the hogan-style hut about a hundred yards away up an escarpment came the cry of a child, bringing to Lukcic the realization that an unknown number of the colony hadn't yet come down to the campfire.

And then there was the drum.

Lukcic couldn't remember when the drum started. He was certain it hadn't been beating when he arrived; yet there hadn't been any single moment when he could have said to himself: Ah, there's a drum starting up. Nor could he tell where the sound came from. It just reverberated out of the night, a steady, relentless BONG - pause - pause - BONG - pause - pause - BONG -

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pause - pause. Probably an ordinary skinhead instrument tuned deep and beaten with the palm, Lukcic decided.

Those who had been sitting and sprawling on the hard earth around the fire began to stir, change positions, rise and walk around, go off into the circle of dark by ones, twos and threes, then come back. Ever mindful of Fairfax's warning about not becoming the deviate (although he was *still* convinced the warnings were overdone), Lukcic himself rose and began wandering a bit, trying not to assume the role of curious sightseer (he would not risk going toward the hogan), but glad of the chance to inspect what he could at the fringes of the firelight.

The chopping block, for instance, which was much bigger than it had looked and permanently fixed to the stump. A surprise there. He'd paid no special attention to the tool the blonde girl in the green sweater had used to cut the vegetables with, if asked would probably have sworn it was an ordinary kitchen knife. Thus fixed assumptions deceive. For here it lay, on the block, an obsidian blade crudely honed and deadly tipped, something out of an Aztec orgy.

Hogan, bluejeans, obsidian knife. Well, Fairfax had *said* the colonists at Agapo were eclectic. But then who isn't? Dip whatever flotsam suits your fancy out of the river of life and with it build your own thing.

BONG - pause - pause - BONG - pause - pause....

Two of the males who had left the fire now returned carrying between them a stone basin the size of a punchbowl. It was abrim with a frothy, fruity-looking fluid bound to be alcoholic, or maybe even hallucinogenic. Lukcic hoped not too strong. He needed a drink all right, and he needed not to deviate, and he needed to reassure himself that the stuff wasn't really Kool-Aid, but he also needed to keep his wits about him. That had after all begun to seem important.

For the air was thickening around him in earnest now, the tension so palpable it could be pulled like taffy. Still no one spoke to him (since they didn't seem to speak to one another either, this did not bother him), and so there was no way to get the specifics on what was about to happen.

That this was no ordinary night at Agapo with a few friendly drinks around the fire followed by supper out of the common pot, but a celebration of some important event in the colony, was abundantly clear. And as a social scientist, he should be rejoicing, shouldn't he? Well, then, why wasn't he?

A burly youth with a shag of curly brown hair handed him a coconut halfshell full of punch.

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(Coconuts as drinking cups, and yet here they all were high in the Santa Cruz range in California. Yes, yes — eclectic as all hell. Give old Fairfax a gold star for that at least.)

"Drink up," the youth ordered and waited for Lukcic to comply.

The shock of at last being addressed in his native tongue (but of course in his native tongue, what else?) after having spent all that time in silence (how long he didn't know, having purposely left his watch at home too) rattled Lukcic so that he gulped down the potion as instructed (but then what else could he have done?).

His sudden host reclaimed the drinking shell, redipped it in the basin, and moved off to serve someone else.

BONG - pause - pause - BONG - pause - pause....

However, everything was all-okay. The drink was smooth and easy and tasted familiarly of cranberries. That's probably just what it was, cranberry juice and grocery-store gin, nothing more, the ingredients packed in along with the week's supplies bought at Ben Lomond, or Felton, or Scott's Valley.

Again Lukcic felt a surge of anger with Fairfax, but this time he found he had begun to forget just why he was angry. Even exactly what Fairfax was to him. Details were escaping, leaking out of his head like antifreeze from a damaged radiator. And speaking of radiators, for the first time it occurred to him he had no idea where he'd parked the Land Rover or how to get back there from where he now was. Not even what direction to set out in. After he'd gotten lost on foot, he hadn't troubled to take bearings or remember landmarks, and he had a notoriously poor internal sense of direction.

BONG - pause - BONG - pause - BONG....

A figure in all-white materialized beside the fire. Rendered incautious by sheer fascination, Lukcic moved closer to examine the elegant costume. Gown and hooded cape made all of feathers, white feathers. A bit of gold trim around the face, which was pale, composed, supercilious, regal, faintly epicene. No, more sexless. Or androgynous. Or hermaphroditic. Adam before the becoming of Eve. Something basic here. Universal archetype. Must mean something if he could just get his wits together.

At least he'd had the sense not to try to touch. As the figure moved slowly through the group, a space of two feet radius was magically maintained, as if controlled by an electrical field. No one violated this space.

The appearance of the scapegoat-king, or whatever the hell he/she was, seemed the signal for a

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new letting-go of energy among the crowd, which apparently was growing. There was much activity, even frenzy, which seemed at first meaningless, but began to make vague sense after Lukcic stumbled over an obstacle on the ground and looked down to find a couple sweatily copulating at his feet. "Pardon me," he said, but got no reply.

A whitish blob swam in front of him and he veered backward, afraid he was about to run into the feather prince. But the blob followed him, turning finally into the face of the blonde girl, carrot chopper, Aztec priestess. "I'm Harmonica," she said, or he thought she said. In a businesslike way, she reached for him and reeled him in until he was against her chest. She felt imminently human, warm, bouncy, fragrant. No, you can't *feel* fragrance. Nor hear color. Yet he could swear the drumbeat was a dark red and growing darker.

As she hauled him away out of the ring of firelight, he began gibbering uncontrollably to himself, having just enough caution left to keep the recital sotto voce. I must be all right because I still know who I am and why I'm here. My name is Lukcic and I'm some kind of goddamn graduate sociologist or cultural anthropologist or something working on a book about....

She stuck her tongue down his throat, tore greedily at his clothing.

When, momentarily, he returned to this planet, there were two girls. At least. He reached out from where he lay on a matted tangle of some sweet-smelling crushed fern and seized a piece of the night. It turned into a shiny black braid in his hand. "Diamond," she murmured. "My name is Diamond." Or maybe he imagined it.

Well, group gropes were one of the perquisites of the business he was in, especially when he had to show he wasn't a pervert but just one of the boys and girls. Stripped and glowing like a brand in the cold night air, he remembered to be glad his companions hadn't been able to find any field equipment on him, but what kind of equipment and why he was supposed to be wearing it were part of the wash of information already gone down the drain.

It was a high interval, the best. He did what was expected of him, and finally fell back exhausted, but he hung onto somebody's wrist in the blackness. She whimpered, "Let go. We have to get back. They'll be bringing her down."

Ah. Information at last. "Who?"

"Zora."

"Oh."

BONG - pause - BONG - pause - BONG - pause - BONG - pause....

Back at the campfire, with his clothes on again, he looked into

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many pairs of glazed eyes with his own glazed eyes. He watched the ceremonial group struggling down from the hogan with a litter, which was eventually set down beside the fire. On the litter was a girl, blonde like Harmonica but not Harmonica, swathed in yards of flowing drapery which floated and finally settled around her. She looked wan but peaceful, weary but happy. On the light-colored wrappings near her left hip was a spreading dark stain that in any other context might have been blood, Lukcic thought, though he couldn't rightly fit blood into the present circumstances. His head whirled. The feather prince was nowhere.

He was mighty damned glad when they all started eating.

The stew was served out in smaller wooden bowls, the first bowl being handed to the girl on the litter. She tasted it, paused, then began chewing stolidly.

By the time it was his turn, Lukcic found he was hungry after all. Forkless, spoonless, he tipped up his bowl as he saw the others doing and drank some of the hot, spicy gravy. He snagged vegetables with his fingers, and pieces of meat. There were some fifty people around the fire now, counting half-grown children, all eating quietly, savoring the food. It was good all right. Lukcic tried fuzzily to think how much meat each person would get if two pounds of it were equally apportioned. He must have been right about its being venison, because it tasted more gamy than beef, though there was an extra resilience that reminded him of tripe.

He felt rather than saw that Harmonica was beside him. She seemed cool, a sensible girl. Did he dare take her into his confidence? After all, most of them would know him as a newcomer, so what harm if he asked a few questions?

As it turned out, he didn't need to ask so many as he thought he would.

A strange sound seeped out of the cloth covering around Zora, one of the oddest, most primal sounds Lukcic had ever heard.

Zora pulled the wrappings aside and lifted out the naked newborn, undiapered and raw-skinned. Lukcic was seated near enough to the litter to observe that as she put the child to one of her bare, tumescent breasts, the other suddenly emitted a projectile of milk that arced across several feet of space and into the fire, where it made a faint hiss among the glowing charcoal. The stream had looked white and rich, hence the birth must have taken place some hours before, perhaps the previous day.

The group around the fire sat silent, waiting.

Because the food had cleared Lukcic's head, he could manage

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now to recall some reading he'd done about ritual childbirth, and some California subculture with a midwifery service who'd run afoul of state law, been accused of practicing medicine without a license, after which they had retreated deeper into the wilderness to escape prosecution.

But not before they'd published a pamphlet about their convictions and experiences. Was this what Agapo was all about?

BONG - BONG - BONG....

He wished he could remember more.

Except for the drum, everything was terribly silent now. The baby was still feeding, the unused breast still seeping milk.

Unease was suddenly bursting his insides. He had to turn to Harmonica and ask, "What are we all waiting for?"

"Someone here is going to give up his soul so the baby can have it," Harmonica whispered back.

Metempsychosis yet, Lukcic thought, or something roughly like it. The feather prince, of course. He'd be the human sacrifice. Since Lukcic finally had an open line of communication, he decided to check that out. "Who?" he inquired of his blonde chopper. "The feather freak?"

"Uh-uh."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain sure. Look, I've read Frazer too, but around here we don't go by the book."

"Then how will you choose?"

"There'll be some sign. That's what we're waiting for."

"What kind of sign?" he persisted.

"Who knows? Now. But we'll all know it when it comes."

BONG - BONG - BONG....

Like a sunbeam which thrusts itself unexpectedly over the landscape on a cloudy-windy day, Lukcic's recuperating brain suddenly disgorged a memory of some of the material out of the pamphlet on ritual birth.

A recipe for stew. And the arguments. Eating the placenta was called for by the ritual of course; that was the main thing, the tying of the group together, the oneness. Besides, it was rich in valuable protein and minerals. And palatable.

In that drumming, waiting quiet, with every eye on him, Lukcic leaned over and vomited noisily into the dying fire.

Strong hands seized him front and rear. He went limp. They dragged him onto the block, under the obsidian knife. The drum went BONGBONGBONGBONGBONG.

His last conscious thought was a terrified, murky, though properly scientific one. He wondered if they would also eat the heart they cut out.

There was precedent for it.

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The 14 Gifts

by VANCE AANDAHL

The first to arrive were three kings from the East.
Parading their dromedaries right through the stable,
flashing their invites, they showed us what they'd brought:
Kim Chee a chest of gummy frankincense,
Hatchibombotar the Magus a beaten gold mandala,
and the hunchback Shimakawa sixty grams of myrrh,
which he offered up in a little zippered pouch made
from a snow leopard's ear.

But the Ace was bored stiff. He turned away
in His crib of straw, His eyes and ears stitched
shut with spice.

Next came Prestor John and the Palmwine Drinkard,
chiefs of the South. Between them on a sagging
bamboo pole they toted a barbecued warthog, its charred
back and bristling flanks embedded with cloves
in the design of a harp, and they chanted the story
of Kwaku Ananse, the bearded spiderman who conned
Nyame the sky god into giving him all of the world's stories
including his own.

Now this was somewhat pleasing to the Ace.
He clacked His tongue against His teeth and
fell asleep smiling.

From the North came a delegation of seventeen
advertising executives bearing many gifts in their
ingenious arms: a pair of Jantzen solid knit golf slacks,
a subscription to *Oui*, a two-pound decorator tin of
rock ginger and Jordan almonds, an official ABA basketball,
a Black & Decker powersaw, and a fully jointed nine-inch
Tammy Wynette action doll.

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Thrashing in His dreams, moaning of ovens, the Ace puked
His mother's milk.

Last came Bigfoot, lord of the West and the Great Northwest,
a big fellow drunk on salmon blood,
the dark wet fur of his chest silvered with scales
and little flecks of gut and bone. He brought no gifts
but the ribbons of air from his nose to his lungs
and the winter sun unspooling from the winter rains...
no gifts but the clear bark of his almost human voice
belling in our veins.

"Mother," said the Ace, "lift Me up to this man."

And He pressed His fingers against the slimy doormat
of Bigfoot's chest
and He felt the deep fremitus of Bigfoot's laughter
and He giggled something we couldn't hear into Bigfoot's ear
and everywhere around us in the cold manger
angels came racing up out of nowhere, tripping over their robes,
bumping into each other, shoving us shepherds aside
to sing His glory!

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Robert Thurston has written infrequent but distinguished stories for F&SF, most recently "Dream By Number," September 1975. His new story is, as the title suggests, about alienness, and with its stark realism and chilling detail, it presents a deeper and darker vision than this field usually offers.

Aliens

by ROBERT THURSTON

1

Why do I want to remember his name? I didn't even like him.

Yes, but thirty years ago he was going to be famous by now. The Edmund Wilson of our time. Forcing opinions on us in measured snide howls, manipulating our attitudes with the same precision he used to propel his wheelchair.

Yet I have not heard anything about him since the day he was sent wheeling off the campus, convicted without trial on a dormitory homosexual rap. And hundreds cheered. Well, well, well — the imperious bastard was a flaming faggot, luring his juniors (they were the same age, most of them, but immature intellectually and therefore victims) into immoral adventures. Lucky for Americans everywhere that an alert Board of Vigilantes got the word and officially expelled him, or so the cheering hundreds agreed. And, hell, I was among them. Oh, I *liberally* said how unfortunate it was that a backward officialdom had no mercy in crimes (well, social deviations) like his. But secretly, secretly I was overjoyed that I was free of him. No wonder he liked me in the first place. After all, I was attractive young meat. In time he might have even tried to seduce me, when he got through with the easier marks. God, it was such a relief to me that I could reduce my intellectual envy to a scorn for his personal lusts. A fag's ideas, a fag's philosophies were somehow not valid, I knew.

But what was his name and why can't I remember it? Perhaps I have in that intricate set of pipes in my skull a suppressed (or depressed value of) latent homosexuality. Remember when men worried about latent homosexuality? Anyway, perhaps my fear of my own inclinations in that direction makes

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me forget possible homosexual encounters of my past. My past? It was over thirty years ago and I was twenty.

No, I had no desire for him. He was ugly. Strange looking. All head and torso. Perhaps his legs, shrunken by whatever accident or disease had confined him to a wheelchair, were the cause of that impression. His torso may, after all, have been normal in length. At least I do remember him as barrel-chested with well-muscled arms — that may have caused the effect. I have heard that cripples develop impressive arm muscles from wheeling themselves around. His head was round and bigger than average — that I'm sure of. He purposely emphasized the magnitude of his head. Always wore his hair cut short, Nazi style. It made the fat in his face prominent. His cheeks puffed out as if he stuffed them. His forehead was broad, his hairline started way too far back, Enormous round glasses, with thick lenses that magnified his piglike eyes, dwarfed his nose, which may actually have been of normal size. I can especially recall all the components of that homely face worked into a contemptuous stare. I know he smiled and had more relaxed moments, but I can't visualize them now.

His name was short. Ira or Yasi or Masha or Eli. A short and out-of-the-ordinary name. Yago, Benya, Illya, Radi — nothing rings a bell. I can't stand lying awake half the night trying to think of it. I wouldn't have remembered him at all, but one day I saw the resemblance in the aliens. They of course do not look that much like Ira or Yasi or whatever, but they do have the contemptuous look. And their upper bodies are out of proportion with their legs. And they do look like cripples who have just responded to a healer's demand to throw away their crutches and walk, for the Lord, walk.

Contempt is the mild word for the way they treat us. The collective euphemism. We all say it and we all know it's not quite accurate. We are their playthings, their physical and intellectual amusements, and — to borrow a phrase from blind Gloucester — they kill us for their sport.

2

Just now I had a visit from one of them. He threw open the door with the usual fierceness of these creatures. They require that we keep our doors unlocked. A small concession, since we know they would merely demolish the doors if they found them locked or barred. He charged in, his body moving with that speeded-up bearlike sway that his kind utilize when they are

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feeling extra-arrogant. God, it is so easy to use animal comparisons. Bearlike in their stride, horselike in their bearing when at rest, apelike in their manners, weaselike in their attitudes. Whatever trait or physical attribute you want to mention, there is a bestial mataphor for it.

This one had apparently been here before, but I have never wanted to differentiate them. I am terrified by anthropomorphism. The more often I see them looking like Eli or Masha, or anybody, the more likely I am to start noticing their individual characteristics.

They come here because I am one of the few who speak their language. That would certainly amuse Ira or Yasi or whatever. An able linguist himself, he mocked my deficiencies in that area. I failed French twice. I made farces out of German examinations. In short, I showed no linguistic aptitudes. I can do no more with Earth's other languages than can the average ill-educated American. Parlez-vous a buenos dias or two. But for some reason I can communicate with these ugly creatures. Eli or Masha would be able to figure it out. He would lean over so far that his chin would be almost touching the chrome table's surface, and he would growl:

"You're good at survival, that's what does it. These monsters kill on whim, but they've got enough superficial awareness to protect whatever might be valuable to them. As a survivor, it has been imperative for you to chip yourself into a hard and highly valued gem. Their language came to you to save your life."

All the languages at his command, he might not have been able to do what I do — make small talk with aliens. It would have pained him too much to condescend, I'm sure.

Though I can speak their language, I cannot describe it. What grammar I know does not apply. An apparent future tense can slide easily into a past. Person is understood, and I know of no words for it. They elide sounds that defy elision, except to us rare clever fellows. Verbs, adjectives, adverbs and such have no structural logic. They come out all in a jumble in what seems to be single word. A phrase like "a superficially beautiful day" is scrambled into "ficiatilybeardayperiafulsu" or something like that. Even that is only a vague approximation, a false example for what really goes on in their language. And, should the creature decide to repeat himself, the above approximation would come out different the second time around. The scrambled sounds would be in a different order — and yet it would still make sense, with a logic that I understand only as a

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phenomenon of second nature. I do it, and apparently it comes out right, but I don't know how or why.

Anyway — one of them, like this one, comes in. He talks and I talk back to him and he never corrects me if I am wrong.

"Sir, will you permit me to know the reason for your welcome and pleasant visit?"

What I said had approximately that meaning and tone.

"Crack your neck, do I need a reason to foul myself in this abominable place?"

Even their vocabulary cannot be appreciated with the substitution of ordinary human invective. It would really be better if I could just write down their language as it is spoken, but I have no idea how to write it and doubt that I could accomplish much with phonetics even if I knew phonetics. I slept through most of the required course on linguistics in graduate school. The A I received in the course is directly attributable to my infrequent contact with the subject matter. That is how linguistic courses work.

I stood stiffly in front of the alien and stared into his eyes. They like that. We are not supposed to look away or act natural. It offends them. The mental effort it takes to stare at one of the creatures is prodigious. I suppose, although we have had our bearded eras, it is nevertheless difficult for the average human to enjoy the sight of a face spotted with hair. Especially when it is not spotted with hair in the places we are used to. Especially when the hair is not rough and whiskery, but soft, shiny, and of a white-orange-blue coloring. They comb and primp with articles from their own culture. Their eyes, which look like dotted eggshells and are placed close together, are not pleasant to look at either. The mouth is the most exact resemblance to Masha or Ari. A small orifice kept rigidly in a scornful near-pucker. The mouth moves up, down, and sideways, but it does not change shape appreciably. It is also located a bit to the side of the head, about where we would put a beauty mark. Though the beast is only partially humanoid, his head is very much like Eli or Ira's head. I'm sure that anyone who ever knew him must, during their forced stares at an alien, think of him.

"Sir, is there a possible method by which I could comfort you?"

"Sever your vitals, I require nothing from your excretable self."

But of course he did, or he would not have been there. What he wanted, as it turned out, is what they often want. It is the easiest thing we can give — ourselves as, I guess you would say, sexual partners. Although they use us singly, I do not know if they are a

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bisexual race. They may be unisexual, trisexual, quadrisexual. Anything is possible, since they refrain from having sex with each other, at least when they are among us. From the little I have been able to pick up about the subject from their language, I would guess that sex between or among them is complicated and ritualistic, but I have not been able to put the linguistic clues together to discern anything specific. I don't even know how the race is divided sexually, whether or not there are males and females and neuters and whatevers. I refer to them all by masculine pronouns — for convenience and because they remind me of Ira or Masha. But though they may be puritanical with each other here on Earth (who knows what they do in that goddamned starship), they do build up sexual tension, or some kind of tension anyway, and they use us as outlets for it. It is uncomfortable, but perhaps simple compared to other abuses.

"Sir, is there a need to prepare my body as an object?"

"Your body is good only as an object for dissolution."

"As you wish."

"I would use your body to fill (the word here is untranslatable) in my home."

"May it so transpire."

I present my uttrances in the style of an Arab waterboy because that is what it feels like to converse with the aliens. Actually, their language does not provide for that much self-effacement. They just require simple responses from us. We are not yet their Gunga Dins.

He stormed around the room, perhaps building up the sexual tension further. Then, as if willing to forgive me all my sins, he edged toward me sideways, the first direct statement of his amatory needs. I had to maintain my stiff pose, staring into his ugly face as he came at me. He put one of his arms around my shoulders. Normally it might have felt like a good pal at a bar, a comradely good-fellowship arm. But, as part of the act, something intensified in his skin and there was a stinging pain all through my shoulders. For once I was happy to be looking into his face, because then I didn't have to look down at the arm curling around me. The creatures have many thin spiderlike threads for fingers — I have never counted how many, but there are several. They shot out from the blunted stumpish end of his arm and began to explore my chest. The length of these threadlike fingers sometimes extends beyond my waist even when the stump rests at the top of my shoulder. They force me to straighten my posture to a ramrod stiffness. As thin as the thread-

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fingers are, they are powerfully strong. Aliens can strangle with a single thread, flip over an automobile with a lazy flick of what might be a wrist.

As the threads inched over me, the alien himself turned his body slowly so that it faced me directly. Something fuzzy happened to his eyes. The flecks faded in and out, the eyes retracted a bit.

For a long time we stood together in an embrace which, in human terms, was less than romantic. I am fascinated by the anatomical peculiarities of the act — in that an alien can so thread his arm around us while nevertheless facing us directly. If the terror could be eliminated, it might be a very comforting embrace. As it is, the fear of pain always makes me too apprehensive, and, besides, I cannot endure the eternity of looking into one of their faces, of watching their eyes fade to a splotchy grey.

There was some body pressures from the creature as the act neared its finish. I don't know whether such pressure is from the alien intensifying the embrace, or whether there is some expansion of his body as he reaches what passes for a climax. Unless the emission touches our skin, we do not feel the final stages of the act or, for that matter, know that it is done until the alien releases us. It is believed that he lets go immediately upon completion of the act. I have never been quite sure of that. Whenever I do feel the emission, it is too painful for me to pay attention to the exact moment when the alien gives up the embrace. And when my skin is protected, I am not able to sense the moment of actual emission.

This time I was, fortunately, clothed to the neck. The alien released me with his usual suddenness, and I felt the usual relief that none of his emission had seeped through some unsuspected hole in the cloth. Although the burning sensation, when it does occur, only lasts a half minute or so, the intensity is such that we can't endure the act even when we're positive that we are clothed in garments without rents in them.

Nobody is sure what part of the alien's body produces the emission. It may come directly from the torso — perhaps its sex organ is located somewhere in the center of his chest and comes out from between skin folds at the time of ejaculation. Or perhaps it is not an ejaculation at all, perhaps the jellylike substance which is left upon us filters through the alien's skin or outer shell or whatever it is. Then again, it is possible that the jelly is produced in some higher or lower place on the alien's body and is conveyed to our chest region by a tentacle or a tube

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or penis. The method of ejaculation has been of interest to those of us willing to discuss the creatures' sexual treatment of humans. It seems especially odd that none of the jelly-emission remains anywhere upon the alien after the completion of the act. There is not even a trace upon the threadlike fingers — which, after all, the substance would have to pass through. I have heard debates on the issue: how could a substance that thick not leave some residue on the alien itself? Another common debate topic among the more philosophical of us (and would Ira or Masha have solved it?) is whether the emission is male — i.e., sperm meant for the unknown cavities of the female of their species — or female — i. e., the egg-containing substance left on one of their creatures for the male to come along and fertilize. And all this leads naturally to the question of just how many sexes are there in this species? Radical elements in our society imagine that the emission suggests neither maleness nor femaleness, and that it is representative of a sexual strategy inconceivable to ordinary man. Though of course the radicals have a few theories.

"You are incapable of successful performance," my visitor muttered, also part of the regular ritual. Without any farewell, he left.

After the door clicked shut behind him, I immediately started for the bureau. I had to walk carefully so that I wouldn't dislodge any of the gift that the visitor had left upon me. At the bureau I opened the drawer which contains my postcoital equipment. First I donned rubber gloves, two gloves for each hand. The second pair are my concession to the nightmarish fear of accidental skin contact with the substance. I had to struggle to make them fit over the first pair. I could only struggle just so much, or else I might have dislodged some of the emission from where it clung to my chest. In fact, it was necessary to lean backwards during the act of putting on the gloves. After they were securely on, I took a towel from the top of one of my many piles of towels. The bureau contains only towels and rubber gloves, each separate in neat piles. Wrapping the towel around the emission, I took care to see that it covered the jelly from edge to edge. Slowly I tucked the towel under the rim, and working gradually, I dislodged a portion of the emission at a time, until it was all completely in the towel. Then, speeding up my tempo, I carried the towel to the fireplace and dumped the emission there. Making sure that no small globules of the emission were around my buttons, I unbuttoned my shirt and took it off. I threw it

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on top of the towel within the fireplace. Then I cautiously removed the rubber gloves and added them to the pile. Then I lit a match and set the whole thing afire.

3

Eli or Yago believed that Earth would soon be taken over by the Venusians.

"If you were not so dumb-ass dense," he said one day in the cafeteria of the Student Union, "you'd know that they've been visiting us for centuries."

"You kidding?" I said. "Really?"

"Really? They're among us. They mingle with us, *infiltrate* our society at every level. They're better at it than the Communists are supposed to be, really."

As he generally did when excited by the energy of a concept, he leaned forward with his chin nearly touching the shiny surface of the chrome table. Since his wheelchair sometimes shifted with his movements, he always looked dangerously precarious in this position.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"I know. Anyway, there is voluminous authority for the existence of the Venusians. Many have made contact with them. It is on record. But not in reactionary organs like *Time* or *National Geographic* or *Readers Digest*."

"Where the hell then? Where the hell?"

"Certain publications."

"Ah, shit."

I liked to throw in a bit of street argot during our conversations. Over the weeks I had known him, I had convinced him that I was a former member of a street gang who had reformed and come to college. Before I invented that background, I was just an object of his contempt. Now he *liked* to talk to me, considered me one of his friends, perhaps his only friend — not including, of course, the spectral young man who pushed his wheelchair for him. The specter never talked, though, or did anything besides bringing Ari or Radi and taking him away. So, in my memory as in real life, I rarely sense his presence.

"What I like," Masha or Dimi would say to me, "is the way you've pulled yourself up from nothing. Most of the clods around here wouldn't appreciate that. These middle-class zombies, bourgeois yahoos, all born with plastic spoons in their mouths — they haven't had an idea strike them with any force since they realized that ma-ma was the big nipple and da-da the big asshole. Anatomy's still the only thing they're capable of thinking about."

I, of course, was just as middle-

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class and bourgeois as the next fellow, and secretly proud of it. I liked comfortable values and was considering making a career out of them.

When I was in high school, though, I was frightened of everybody — but especially of the Italian gangs that hung around the street corners and soda fountains. As a result, I worked my walking routes so that they included only vacant street corners, and I went to soda fountains at odd hours or in a crowd. Even then, I sometimes ran afoul of a gaggle of hoods. For a while one of them — a guy with a name something like Bruno Labonza — took an especial dislike to me, taunting and slyly threatening me at every opportunity. One day, however, I was caught masturbating in the gym shower room, after I'd been sent off the playing fields because of a faked injury, and I was publicly admonished. After that, Bruno liked me a lot better.

With Ira or Eli, I cast myself as a buddy of Bruno's. I told him long stories of our days of cruising, leaning, thieving, hubcapping, bullying, drinking cheap wine, and generally brawling. I recall one epic which I developed at great length. It detailed how me and the gang trapped cheerleaders — and only cheerleaders — behind bushes, where we generally toyed with their private parts. Such playing, I said, sometimes led to consent and sometimes to keen and neat perversions. Eli or Yasha especially liked this epic, which in proper style I embellished with each retelling. I enjoyed the embellishing particularly. At that time I fancied myself as something of an actor, anyway. I had just joined the Blue Masquers, the campus acting group with a reputation for depravity and flamboyance, two hobbies I desperately desired to take up. I had already imagined my just-burgeoning acting career (one role at that time, the juvenile in *Skin of Our Teeth,* played in a jerky imitation-James-Dean style) into a career capped by an Oscar for my incisive performance in, probably, *The Bruno Labonza Story.*

"A guy like you comes to ideas differently," Eli or Radi would say. "You've descended to Hell without even a Virgil as a guide, and come out of it without the kind of bourgeois Wasp puritan ethic that these other goons wear like medals. What you can do is, you can appreciate the fantastic and you can make the leaps to truth."

I nodded and said something like:

"Ah, what's truth, anyway?"

I had mastered the art of provocative questions.

"Exactly. All these idiots around here think their classroom notes are truth. If they take notes at

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all and don't just buy them from the nearest fraternity along with the questions and answers to the final exams."

"Exams, hell, exams. They're trash."

"But they don't know that, the cretins. They're just being manipulated by the system. The government, this school, all schools, they're just leading them like sheep. Like Bo-Peep's sheep, who the hell knows where to find them — but they'll come home. They're just geared to getting that job. They all want to become druggists. Just druggists — whatever job it is, it's a druggist job. Whether it's a druggist behind a desk, or at the controls of a plane, or just behind a counter, dispensing the poison. That's what a druggist does, dispenses poison, and no responsibility, you see, they take no responsibility for the way they poison the rest of us, the way they poison each other. We're all just druggists here, and your prescription is slow death, dear ones, would you like it in tablet or powder form? And how about the big economy capitalistic size?"

"Yeah. It's capitalism, all right. Doing it."

"Sure, right. That's capitalism. Murdering is capitalism, all right. And think of the sheer bureaucratic efficiency of it. It's like saying we are all, all of us, murderers here, but — *but* individually we are not guilty. That's the system, and it's there to be overthrown — all we need is our Lenin or Trotsky. Even a Kerensky, for God's sake!"

"Ssshhh, Eli or Yasha."

"What are you shushing me about?"

"Be careful what you say, and don't say it so loud. Not *here* especially."

"Boy, you still have a long way to go. Joe McCarthy is not omnipresent. Where is he hiding, in this napkin container?"

"Well, I just would be careful. Remember, it's only been less than a year since HUAC was in town."

"Screw HUAC."

"Ssshhh!"

He was angry. Nevertheless, he lowered his voice and leaned forward. He hovered over the chrome-top table, just above its surface. His voice slipped through the space between a pepper shaker and a Heinz Ketchup bottle.

"I want to be heard! What does it matter if some HUAC flunkie or some disciple of Joe Goddamned McCarthy hears me? They're going to think twice before calling up a cripple to the stand. That's an advantage we cripples have. You got to have good evidence against a cripple before you can take a chance like that. You, on the other hand, they don't give a damn about. They can call you a conspirator,

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and you're gone, vanished, thrown down the toilet of the men's room off the corridors of power. They'll get you, that's who they'll get." Suddenly he raised his voice. "HUAC is the S.S. in our more sophisticated system of fascism!"

A couple of fraternity guys at a nearby table started to stare at us. It seemed to me that one of them took notes on a napkin.

"Take it easy, Ira or Masha. I think somebody over there's taking notes on all this."

He half turned in his wheelchair, and the two fraternity types went back to their cokes and French fries.

"That's it, don't you see? The whole bloody thing is based on taking notes. You take notes, you can become a graduate druggist and a capitalist. See? Take two of these four times a day, and five of these every other day...."

"Ummm — tell me more about the Venusians."

He turned back, willing apparently to be diverted from his subject.

"They are capable of looking just like us. That's how they're able to visit us so freely and mingle."

"But why? What are they doing?"

"Just observing. They are just watching us, keeping tabs. If they ever think it's necessary to intervene, they will. But, for the time being, we're just zoo people to them. Every once in a while, to one of the more intelligent of us, they will reveal their presence, and the lucky receptor gets a glimpse of their ideas, their goals, their intentions."

"Yes, but what are they like?"

"Physically they are somewhat like us. Humanoid, anyway. When they are among us, they influence our minds so that we can see them in our own image. Occasionally they take a more active part in our affairs, but they never exert control over us. They become advisers, counselors to the king, or prime minister, that sort of thing. It is clear that they importantly influenced both the Aztec and Inca cultures, but since then they have maintained a greater distance toward the human race, perhaps logically, considering what we did to the Aztecs and Incas."

The two fraternity guys were furtively observing us again. I wished that Ira or Eli would speak up so that they could hear this garbage and dismiss us totally. Anybody talking of capitalists in one breath and visiting Venusians in the other is not a good bet for anyone's witness stand.

"I wish one of the Venusians would show up here, now. Show these goons up for what they are."

"What are they? Besides goons, I mean."

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"They are intellectually inadmissible evidence. They have no right to exist, no right even to be druggists."

"A guy's got to have a job."

"What? Oh, yeah. Good joke. I don't know how you picked up that sense of irony, especially with your street background."

"You learn a lot from the streets. Did you ever meet a Venusian yourself?"

"No, damn it. Not me. Though my — but never mind about that, I'm not supposed to talk about that."

"About what?"

"Never mind. Some other time, maybe."

I always intended to tell Masha or Radi that I was not really a reformed hood, but there always seemed a reason to continue the fraud — there was always that eager admiration in his eyes that prodded me into the telling of another street adventure.

"Me and the guys used to hang around this soda fountain, The Royal, and so did the high-school basketball team. They used to come there after practice, trace out their plays in lines of sugar on the tables, while they drank lime rickeys and cherry cokes. Me and my buddy, Bruno Labonza, used to stand right next to their table and tell them how crummy they played. This got to them one day, you know, and they trapped me and Bruno out in the alley behind The Royal. All five starters and two of the subs against just me and Bruno — the rest of the gang were down hustling suckers at the pool hall. Well, they surrounded us and said they were gonna take care of us this time. Bruno just looked cooly around at those seven goons and said, 'Yeah? You and who else?' Then he nodded toward me and gave me that funny Bruno smile with the twitch at the corner — Bruno and I always communicated that way: a nod, a move, a smile, a gesture — we didn't need words, I always knew exactly what he meant. Simultaneously we reached into our jacket pockets and pulled out the old equalizers, the old switchblades. We even clicked them open together. All those big tall boys, their faces went white, and they produced sweat so fast, that alley smelled like the gym after a game. I made a quick slash in one direction, Bruno the same in another, and we both drew blood. My guy was a forward, and he wore his shooting arm bandaged the next few games. Brought down his team-leading average, too. Well, those guys raced out of the alley faster'n'a fast break. And me and Bruno never laughed so hard in our lives."

"What's happened to your friend, this Bruno?"

"Ummm — he works down at

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the drug store, I think."

"Christ in hell, they make druggists out of everybody. Rousseau should be around now, he'd be getting his aspirin from a noble savage."

I would have told Ira or Lenta the truth, but suddenly they had kicked him out of school, and I had never had the chance.

4

From my front window I watched a group of aliens at play. Very little of what they did together made any sense to me. This time they were closely assembled. For a moment they interlaced their thread-fingers in a cat's cradle of some complexity. One of them grunted something that might or might not have been ritualistic. At least it was meaningful to the others. The shortest, squattest member of the group pulled away, wrapped some of this thread-fingers around his head, bent slightly forward, and ran a wide arc away from them, then back to the group. This seemed to please them. Another one performed similarly, though his path, instead of being an arc, seemed a pattern of straight lines and oblique angles. They separated their thread-fingers and stood still for a long time. Then they started talking rapidly. When they talked among themselves, I could never understand their language; it went by too fast for me.

A man came around the corner, saw the group, and slowed his pace for a second. Perhaps realizing that the aliens did not like for us to turn around obviously and walk away from them (and would sometimes pursue us), he decided to brave it out and walk down the street past them. He was an average-looking man, about my height and weight but a bit younger. As he passed the alien group, he put on a big smile. How could he be so stupid, I thought. The smile was a mistake, a provocation. Aliens were antagonized by signs of happiness, even when false. So, of course, one of them whipped out an arm at him, catching him in several places with the thread-fingers. Even from my distance I could see red marks on the man's face. Another creature moved toward him. The man stood stiffly, in the position of sexual offering, but the creature naturally did not wish that and instead pushed at the man's chest. Standing stiffly had affected his balance and he fell backward. A bad fall, he hit his head on the pavement. The aliens stood over him and watched impassively as he struggled to his feet. Then, each alien choosing his own pattern of movement, they began to stalk the man. He was obviously panicked by their movement. Often, when they kill one of us, the act is preceded by

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this choreographed stalking. We never know when they might decide to kill. They do not do it that often. Most of the time they just toy with us, then let us go or, at the worst, use us sexually.

The man let out a shriek, which prodded the creatures to close in on him. He stumbled backwards, into my doorway. I could have pretended not to be at home, but I really did not have that choice. Even though I would rather have left the man to be a victim of the aliens' whims, I was human enough to protect him. There was still a sense of community among us, even if it had been eroded by the coming of the aliens. I worked the door to as narrow an opening as possible, and the man slipped in. I closed it quickly and prayed that one of them would not decide to storm in. When they are in groups, they do not usually enter our homes. This time was no exception.

"Thank you, brother," the man said when he had recovered his breath. The red marks were fading on his face. He must have tangled with them, or somebody, at another time for he had a scar running diagonally across his forehead. Except for that, his face was ordinary. A bit pinched at the sides and elongated, but ordinary.

I returned to the window.

"You can stay as long as they're out there, then —"

"Good of you, brother."

"And then take off. Hospitality's not one of my strong points."

"Saving a life seems pretty hospitable, at least from my point of view, and when it's my life."

"I do what's ethical. Friendly is something else."

"Have it your way. I don't interfere in people's lives, brother."

"Stop calling me brother."

"Sorry. It is my way. I'm illegitimate, you see, and never had any family, so —"

"Please, I don't care to hear your life story just now."

"Have it your way. Anyhow, thanks for getting me out of that scrape."

He shrugged, and sighed. I turned my attention to the view outside. Behind me, I could hear him scuffling around the room.

"Big place," he said, "especially when you're used to a hovel, like me. You don't believe in furnishings much, do you?"

"Not as deity anyway."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"What do you do?"

"I *was* an accountant. A C.P.A."

"Oh, really? But what do you do now?"

"I'm still an accountant, I suppose. Just not practicing for a while."

"Oh. Life of leisure, huh?"

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"Something like that."

He joined me at the window. The aliens had returned to their original grouping. One of them squatted down, as if to relieve himself, and the others spread their thread-fingers above his head.

"They can get pretty frisky sometimes," he said. I decided not to respond to the word frisky. "It's frightening, but I suppose we should try to work with it."

"How do you propose 'working with it?'"

"Well, try to understand, try to see things their way. We believe —"

"We? Who are you?"

"Well, when I say we, I don't mean a group exactly. But I run with a pretty intellectual crowd, and some progress is being made on communicating with our visitors, so —"

"Oh, I see. You can talk with them, too."

"Well, I can't, but some of — say, you mean you're one of the fortunate?"

The squatting alien stood up and walked to the nearest street lamp. Extending his thread-fingers and wrapping them around it, he pulled at it until it was bent in half. The feat reminded me of a Charlie Chaplin movie where the bully, Mack Swain probably, did the same thing while Charlie, in cop uniform, looked on. *Easy Street*?

"Jesus, what I wouldn't give to be able to speak their language. There's so much I want to talk with them about. Why are you looking at me so funny?"

"I can't imagine talking with one of them about anything."

"You would if you put your mind to it, if you'd — what's the matter?"

"I'm not used to strangers telling me where to put my mind."

"You're too touchy, brother."

The way he said brother made me feel that we were somehow incestuously linked. Or that he thought so, anyway.

"Why don't you just shut up? Then they'll go away and you'll go away and all of us'll be happy."

He honored my request for only a moment, then said:

"Some of us've talked with them quite extensively, you know."

"For which privilege I imagine you've devised some extraspecial acts to satisfy their desires."

"You don't have to get insulting, you know."

"I realize I don't have to. That constitutes some of the joy of doing it."

He remained silent for another half a minute. The aliens just continued their fun and games, made no move to go away.

"They're quite intelligent, you know. Perceptive."

"Oh?"

"Easy to figure out. For one

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thing, after all, they must have some kind of starship drive — to get here and all. I suppose you must be cynical about that."

"No. I realize that mankind has a tendency to measure cultural intelligence by the degree and amount of transportational developments."

"You're a smug bastard, you know that?"

"I thought you were the bastard, but let that —"

"Hell, all you negativists are all alike. I don't know why we bother to talk to you, or —"

"I'm sure the aliens make much better conversationalists."

"Even that's a mistake —"

"What's a mistake?"

"You think of them as aliens. Probably in your mind they're transformed into terrible creatures, like in an old-time monster movie."

"Their looks are repulsive, they're brutal to us, sometimes they kill us — and I'm not supposed to think of them as creatures, according to you — who, incidentally, nearly lost your life out there because of those —"

"The brutality and killing have been exaggerated out of all proportion. That is the work of only a few, one segment of their expeditionary force. A smaller percentage overall, I might add, than the number of murderers, rapists, and thieves in our own society."

"Or perhaps the percentage of crazy people who go around finding rationales for loving monsters."

"Most of them are not only intelligent, but they refrain from doing us harm. And, in fact, they are applying their vast technological knowledge to improving our own situations."

"Oh, for God's —"

"No, really. You may not know it, but they're quietly improving many things. They've set up hospitals where they're using medical techniques so advanced from ours that they're getting cures in hopeless cases. And they've promised depollutants and —"

"And we can forgive them a few random murders, a little frivolous brutality, some fun sex, a bit of —"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying we have reason to co-operate with them, in the long run it'll —"

"Let me know when they start improving the highways."

The alien group was beginning to walk up the street. I felt a sense of relief. When they were out of sight, I would be able to get rid of my visitor.

"You're hopeless, you know that?"

"Or moralistic."

"Well, let me lay this idea on you. It's been more or less definitely established that these, what you call, creatures are human."

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"Oh, Jesus Chri —"

"No, really. Really. They really are. Humanoid, you can tell that much. But there's some solid evidence for believing them to be basically human."

"And how did you — you people — come to this felicitous conclusion?"

"Doctors, they've been surreptitiously examining them, though they can't of course open one of them up to verify their beliefs. But they're pretty sure they have about the same internal structure — one heart, a liver, even a pair of kidneys, that sort of thing. They subsist well on our food, and, in their gruff way, the best of them seem quite compatible with us."

"How about sex?"

"Well, that's a drawback. Nobody's ever quite sure about that little part of it. There's been no findings of, well, penis or vaginal areas. It's natural, the way things are. We're not even sure of their excretional methods, for that matter."

"Nobody's ever seen one shit, eh?"

"About it."

The aliens turned the corner, and the street was empty.

"You can go now."

"Listen —"

"The door. Out. Good-by, brother."

"You'll learn."

"I sincerely hope not."

He backed away from me as if he expected me to whip out one of my threaded limbs at any minute. From the window I watched him go up the street and turn the corner around which he had originally come.

5

Right before Yasha or Ira was expelled, I played The Ragpicker in the Blue Masquers' production of *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, a play that must be way out of date by now. The Ragpicker, a sort of spokesman for the author, learned what he knew of the capitalists' devious lives from his examination of their garbage. He was also secretly in love with the madwoman. I played the role well, because I was secretly in love with the actress who was playing the madwoman.

I did not really grasp the political level of the play, but that did not bother Yadi or Sasho. He was convinced that I had absorbed all of the play's anticapitalist messages and was so enthusiastic in delivering them because I was so committed to transmitting them subversively to the audiences. And, of course, in his mind my efficiency was due to his training. A complete Pygmalion job, you see: street-corner hood to Lenin on the railways.

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"I sometimes wondered about you," he said.

"Yeah? Why?"

"I didn't think we were always connecting. I could still see the streets sometimes in your eyes, know what I mean? It looked like you clicked off and didn't really understand what was going on any better than you had in your days of running with that Bruno Labonza and the rest."

"Yeah, but Bruno had a lot on the —"

"Sure, sure, and when the time comes we'll elevate people like him to their proper levels, the levels this repressive society won't even let them seek, much less reach."

"That'll be good for Bruno."

"Nobody else in that whole damn play had the first idea of what it was about. Only you."

"Well, thanks."

I felt like a fraud.

At the same time I was afraid he might try to engage me in a discussion of the play's ideas, and I would founder and display my ignorance. But he only skirted the periphery of that subject, and I was able to keep him convinced of my insights into the play with my usual ploys.

Yet it all depressed me. I was tired of pretending to understand when actually the least penetration of an important concept turned my brain into a TV dinner. At the same time, I was depressed at having to admit to myself that I had missed the intellectual underpinnings of my role.

I had come away from the performance feeling so exhilarated. I really felt that I had been good. The waves of approval from the audience were overwhelming, and I received the best reviews of the cast. But if I had to admit to myself that my love for the madwoman-actress had invested my performance with an energy that clouded the lines I spoke, if I had been all that dumb, how could it have been good acting? It was a deception deeper than the normal pretense of theater. I retreated from Sasha or Eli feeling that no matter how good I had been, I had not really been good. He might have been pleased to know that.

The last few times we were together, we got along especially well. And all because of my Ragpicker performance. So our final rapport was just another kind of fraud on my part. And played about as well.

6

I sensed that an alien would visit me within the hour. I had developed a sixth sense about their visits, or perhaps some kind of invisible aura preceded them. Or maybe, though their selections seemed random, they planned

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ahead and sent out telepathic messages. Whatever it was, it was handy since it enabled me to be well-prepared. I selected my thickest, highest necked wool sweater, my heaviest trousers, my solidest shoes — then sat and waited in the sweltering heat inside my apartment.

Perhaps my mind drifted off, or perhaps I dozed off for a minute — but suddenly there were two men in front of me. They had not seemed to enter through door or window, or from another room. Suddenly they were just there.

"Where'd you guys come from?"

"Outta the woodwork, fella."

"You're termites?"

"Funny fella, hey, Tony?"

"Yeah."

"Who are you?"

"Tell you that later. You sit tight while we *inspect*."

They toured the room as if they expected to make significant discoveries.

"All clear."

"Right, Tony."

One of them, the one who was not Tony, pushed a chair next to mine and sat down.

"Nothing to worry about," he said. "We're friends. Allies."

His face was angular, mottled in complexion. His hairpiece lay so flat on his head, he might as well have gone around bald, or merely rubbed black shoe polish on his scalp. He was old, but he obviously prided himself on his youthful bearing. A youthful bearing which, incidentally, worked about as well as the hairpiece.

"What are you guys here for?"

"Tell you that later. First, I wanna know some things."

"Anything. I'm your inquisition witness."

"This isn't an inquisition, just a friendly conversation. We know something about you, mainly that your attitude toward our bristled visitors is something less than amicable."

"You mean, I don't like them?"

"Right. You don't think their presence on human turf is entirely beneficial to the continuing evolution of the race."

"You mean, I don't like them being here?"

"Right. You understand the first time, I know. You have linguistic abilities, I am told."

"That's possible. Who are you guys?"

"Sorry, I am generally slow with amenities, especially on a job. This's Tony Riccardo; my name's Bruno Pelletieri."

"Your name is what?"

"You've heard of me?"

"Not exactly. But your name's Bruno, right?"

"Right. You got something against the name?"

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"No. No, nothing."

"Or maybe it's the Italian. Maybe you're against Italians."

"No. Not at all. It's just that I knew some — had a friend named Bruno once."

"Was it me? I got a poor memory for old acquaintances."

"No, it wasn't you. Definitely not. The Bruno I knew, he was a druggist last I knew."

"I worked in a drug store once. It was a good cover."

"In Lockport, New York?"

"No, never in Lockport, New York. I got a cousin some place like that. Lockport, Brockport, some place like that. Cosimo Sansone, you know him?"

"No, I knew a Sansone, but not —"

"Well, maybe it was someplace else. Don't matter much. He bought it ten-fifteen years ago. He let his mouth run like it had a stoolie-cassette in it. Wound up in the Erie Canal, with minnows swimming in and out of his skull. Something bothering you?"

"I don't remember any minnows in the Erie Canal."

"Sorry, just colorful speech. I picked up colorful speech from my Uncle Vito. He went on a quiz program once and practiced a long time before it. You're probably right about the minnows. Lucky if there's anything alive in the Erie Canal. Not much alive in any waters anywhere in this country. We gave it away, gave away the whole damn country to a bunch of assholes. No wonder the monsters just waltzed in and took us over. We'll get it back, you'll see, you'll —"

"We? Are you part of an organization?"

"Tell you about that later. You get visits from three of the monsters, right?"

"I get visits. I don't know from how many."

"You get visits at all, you're getting them from three probably. That's the way they usually work. Group of three picks out a likely type, especially one of the guys that speaks the lingo, but not always, and they come to you in alternation at pretty much regular intervals. Not always three, but for you it's three. You mean, you've never noticed that you see the same trio all the time?"

He leaned forward in his chair. In the dim light, the shadows on his face seemed to be floating debris.

"Tell you the absolute truth," I said, "I never look at them very closely or do anything to establish their identities."

"Can't say as I blame you. In actual fact, you are being visited by three of the most highly placed uglies in the whole hierarchy of uglies. You are quite favored."

"I can't say I'm flattered."

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"Well, no accounting for tastes. Some people are."

"Are what?"

"Flattered by the attention of the bristlies. There're some finks who suck right up to them, who can even enjoy the abuse of a sexual encounter, if that's what you call it. I don't know what it is, I never had the privilege. You enjoy it, what they do?"

He spoke so softly, so casually, that he could have been a priest in a confessional — but I resisted the urge to detail my sins to him.

"How do you guys know so damn much about me? I never speak to anybody."

"I don't know about that. I heard you were something of a blabbermouth."

"I don't know what — wait a minute. That man this afternoon. That holy roller who wanted to canonize aliens, he told you."

"Not exactly, but that's the source all right. He's a member of some, I don't know, alien-lovers society and social tea group. Bunch of people who want to make human beings outta monsters, magic society or something. Whatever, he run back and told them all about his frustrating encounter with this guy who wouldn't believe monsters could be reasoned with. So, we got an agent infiltrated into this little group — these days, we got agents everywhere, believe it — and our boy got in touch with one of our people, to turned out to have smarts and sent out the contract pronto-tonto."

"The what?"

"Contract. We, me and Tony, we're what is known in your tabloid weeklies as contract men. Hit men, soldiers, take your pick. But don't worry, man, you're not the target. I can see it in your face, you think you're the target. No, man, we're in the same ball game on the same side, and we're the relief specialists, comin' in with the score definitely against us and getting the old knuckle ball in —"

"Then what do I have to do with the contract?"

"Tell you that later. Not too good to know too much, even if we are both in the same panty hose."

"You keep me in suspense, Bruno."

"All for the good of —"

"Hey, Bruno," Tony called from the window. "Looka this."

Bruno strolled over to the window and looked out. I followed and tried to see over their shoulders. All I saw was a plumpish young woman walking on the other side of the street.

"How'd you like to put your hands on that?" Tony said. "You could spread your fingers out and there'd still be then some left over."

"Yeah, suppose, if you like that sort of thing."

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"Ah, your prick died and forgot to invite you to the funeral. That is ass, boy, that is the real thing."

Bruno turned to me.

"I'm too old, I guess. Tony here's got a fixation on ass."

"Yeah," said Tony.

"It's the thing with his generation. Tits are out, ass is in. They like, kids like Tony, they like a good solid and large ass on a broad. They've got it all lined out in terms about contours, shapes, and all that. I don't know, I mean I can appreciate a shapely rear end and all that, but this fixation, I don't know what they see in it."

"Maybe it's a form of narcissism," I said. Bruno looked at me strangely. Tony's attention was on the woman.

The heat of the room and jitteriness over my two visitors was making me sweat heavily under my thick clothing. I felt dizzy, so I returned to my chair. Bruno followed partway, then decided to roam around the room.

"You still fuck women?" he asked suddenly.

"What is this, Saturday night at the soda fountain? Want me to open my wallet and show off my rubbers?"

"Sorry, don't get riled, people always get riled when you ask them questions like that. Not out to bug you. Reason I ask, a lot of people who've been, well, chosen by the monsters for their sex play no longer can stand being with women. They're not turning queer or anything, you understand, the monsters've just affected them psychologically about women. I notice you live pretty much alone."

"I lived alone before they came."

"Oh. Why's that?"

The maddening thing about Bruno's questions was that he was genuinely curious and asking them without sarcasm.

"I have never been — never been attractive to women. Don't get that look, I've had a few. But nothing ever worked out."

I could not tell Bruno that they were always second-rate and never stayed around — that they insulted my sexual abilities and suggested special doctors.

"Too bad. I was never the woman-chaser Tony is. I had a wife for a while and liked being a family man. But she run off one day with somebody I never found out. She got some kind of hemorrhage and passed on, we brought —"

"Bruno," Tony said, "don't tell that story again."

"What story? It's my life."

"Why do you got to tell it to everybody? On every job?"

Bruno shrugged. He sat down beside me again. Apparently he could see my nervousness.

"Take it easy, son. We're on

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your side, remember that."

"Why do you keep saying that? What's this all about?"

"Just our job. We work for, I guess you'd say, the Outfit."

"The Outfit? You mean the Syndicate, the Mafia, the Cosa Nostra, the mob —"

"Yeah, we've had those, uh, corporate names in the past. I prefer the Outfit, has a nice tough ring to it without all those other gruesome associations."

"Well, what does that Outfit want with me?"

"Tell you that later. Look, sitting here in your little dark hot apartment, you don't get a good idea of what's going on in the world out there, I think. You become stagnant, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I—welcome your judgement."

"Things are being done. We're not sitting still, lotta people aren't sitting still. But nobody gets anywhere without organization, and I don't mean the kind that sends memos to each other. So the Outfit has stepped in, that's the size of it. Our operations have gone to hell since the invasion, anyway, and it's only logical that, with the setup we got, we're the only ones with the capability necessary to obliterate the problem. Well, there's the government of course, but they're too busy playing both sides of the fence. Sure, they're willing to co-operate with us and condone secretly whatever eliminations we succeed at. Their lousy bureaus are certainly not willing to commit themselves, they pretend they gotta be busy arranging revolutions in South America and Africa. What it is, they're afraid one of their agents'll fail, and the aliens'll connect it up to the right places, and so much for the government, long live the new government if they can brave it out."

Bruno put his hand on my arm. I don't know why, but the act suggested a drunk just as he is about to give you the sincere version of his life story.

"So the government's fuckin' worthless. Oh, they'll divert some funds, a weapon or two, some research data, but that's about it. Most of the time, they're standing around with a finger up their nose, co-operating with the beasts, doing what the beasts tell them. For scientific and technological progress, they say. But it's really fear. They don't know how goddamn many of the creatures there are, how many might still be floating around the Earth in that monster starship — what weapons might be in that starship that'll burn old Earth to a cinder. That's their excuses. But what it is, is they just don't know, so they tread the line. They'll come around. They're

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already impressed with our success so far. They —"

"Bruno," Tony called sharply from the window. Then he edged back into a dark corner.

"Right," said Bruno, and turned to me. "You do just what you normally do. Tell it we're here if you want to. Won't make any difference."

Bruno stood up and moved to the opposite side of the room. The weapon he was now carrying looked awesome. Its barrel was long, its casing seemed thick.

There was a long wait before the door was flung open and the alien strode in.

"Sir, leave quickly," I shouted to him in his own language.

"Gouge your skull, why —" the alien said before being caught in the crossfire and falling. I think that each of the contract men fired only once.

7

I became too involved with the Blue Masquers — acting and partying and sitting around the group's office and skipping classes — to see much of Mesha or Eli. Pretending to be a dissolute member of an allegedly scandalous acting troupe was much more fun than swapping intellectual ploys in the student union. Some dissolute! A few pitchers of beer in a seedy bar and loud renditions of labor-unions songs from the thirties. My girl friend, who would not let me into her pants, throwing up in the back of a car, then a few days later getting mad at me and announcing her engagement to a homosexual while I was busy reading *Soldiers Pay* across the table from them. Unjustified hilarity while going from place to place to place. Trying to join the Communist Party but being unable to find it. Sitting around dark coffee houses belittling the talents of their folk singers. It was, I suppose, more a pose of dissolution than the real thing. Perhaps I would have become dissolute, but it was not long after I embraced dissipation that I dropped out of college altogether. When I returned some time later, the Blue Masquers had been dissolved by outsiders who preferred it that way.

One day, probably only a short time before his expulsion, Ari or Fasha beckoned me over to his table. I was on my way to a rehearsal and was a bit miffed about the interruption, but I sat down across from him. He was unusually silent for a long time, which made me nervous. So I would appear calm, I mentally went over my lines as The Innkeeper in *The Drunkard*.

"We never finished our conversation about the Venusians." he said abruptly.

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"No, I guess —"

"My father knew one. I meant to tell you that. My father knew a Venusian."

I was immediately irritated. My experience with the Masquers made me too sophisticated for nonsense like this. Yet, I was still a little afraid of his sarcasm; so I feigned interest.

"A Venusian? A real one, huh?"

"I don't know that there are any fake ones."

"Right, of course. What was — was this Venusian like? Did it look different?"

"It was a female of the species. As to her looks, well, that's part of the story as father told it to me. This all happened years ago, before he met my mother."

I was relieved to hear that, since the thought had occurred to me that he might claim that the Venusian was his mother."

"When would it be then, that this happened?"

"Quite long ago. Probably some time in the early thirties. I'm sure it was during the Depression; so it had to be then. He was some sort of organizer at that time, for one of the socialist groups. There were a number of splinter groups by then, and my father was the dedicated kind who worked for any group whose cause he thought was worthy. So I don't know which group this was. He was working an academic community in the Midwest, trying to unionize professors, a futile goal if there ever was one. Even today, college teachers think it's undignified to be part of the labor movement. It's unprofessional to strike, bargain, any union-type thing. So think of how it was back in the thirties. My father had no chance."

He spoke differently, he was pressing too hard. His voice was agitated, hoarse, without the regulated nervous energy that was normally his undertone. He was making me jittery. But there was no way to leave the table. So I sat and listened quietly while he described some of his father's early efforts to bring academicians to the union wheel.

"But, whatever he did, they gave him the cold shoulder, acted as if he weren't one of them, as if he did not have two degrees and a Phi Beta Kappa key. With cowards, if you don't lick the usual boots, they begin to distrust you, no matter what your credentials. And professors are among the most extreme cowards. Especially professors. So, Lisa came along when my father was so ostradized he was considering leaving."

"Lisa?"

He responded sharply, an admonishment for not concentrating.

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"Lisa. The Venusian. Only he didn't know that then. He knew nothing about their presence on Earth. He read up on all that later — in fact, he more or less left the labor movement and his socialist groups and concentrated on researching Venus and Venusians from then on. Oh, he had a brief flurry with the pacifist movements before the war, but like a lot of others he could not follow his comrades to the justification of Stalin's tactics. Personally, I think he was wrong there. Not that I approve of the purges and the deal with the Nazis and all, but because the split sapped the strength of the American Communist Party just at a time when it desperately needed solidarity. Not that father was a Communist, he never went that route, or so he said."

I wanted to tell Ira or Masha that I did not want to sit still for a lecture on outdated politics, but I had carefully built up certain attitudes for his benefit, and I could not violate them now.

"Lisa came to town with the circus."

"The what?"

"The circus. No surprise, many Venusians choose varieties of show business. It works two ways for them. One, it's a convenient and compatible milieu, good for hiding out, and since show-business people are protective of their own, it makes less difference whether or not they are found out. Second, Venusians understand that they can contact other Venusians in the show-biz world. They —"

"Wait, how the hell do you know all this?"

"Mostly from my father. Some I've read or heard from others. Look, the Venusians have been coming here on a regular basis for centuries. There's no telling how many there are around at any given time. Since they have little or no organization to the way they move among us, some stay for years, others come back and forth like tourists without involving themselves in our affairs."

"They must look like us then, I mean, to move among us like that."

"Well, not exactly. They are able to look like us. Whether from a structural alteration or through telepathic suggestion, I don't know. I suspect the first, because it seems as if a Venusian on Earth retains human appearance when he dies. In their natural state, they are not totally unlike us, but I'll get to that."

He leaned forward and started moving salt and pepper shakers as he talked. The wheelchair, apparently unbraked, moved backward a bit, and since his helper was engrossed in one of his daydreams, Ira or Josha had to adjust for the change with his elbows.

"Lisa did some kind of aerial

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stunt, hanging by her teeth and spinning or something like that. She was a top act, got second or third billing. But my father did not see her at first at the circus. Instead, he was wandering around, wondering which bus to take out of town. Suddenly he stumbled across a particularly unpleasant incident between a townsman and a — a colored man. He didn't remember the details, but of course the colored man was being pushed around. My father believed in the advancement of colored people, and so he hated to see injustice done them, and it was natural of him to step forward to intervene. But Lisa got there first. Even though she was tiny and hardly weighed a hundred pounds, she got in between the two men and demanded that the — the Caucasian stop whatever injustice he was perpetrating. Well, the man was surprised of course, and he made a move as if to gently push her aside. And the next thing — my father said he never figured out how she did it but was sure it was some kind of Venusian fighting method — anyway, she did something, and the man was flat on his back and not wanting to get up just that minute. A couple of nearby people began to look menacing. So my father rushed Lisa and the colored man down the street and away.

"My father only had bus money in his pocket, but he used it to take Lisa to dinner in a good restaurant. And remember in those days treating somebody at a diner was a special occasion, much less a restaurant. They hit it right off, my father and Lisa. He had been in so depressed a mood that he found himself responding in an unusual way to Lisa — that is, though he was normally a secretive and withdrawn man, he started telling her everything about himself, including his union mission in the town and his complete socialist background. Turned out his political views were close to hers. They talked so intensely that Lisa almost forgot she had a show to do. She presented my father with a pass to the evening performance and ran off.

"He was of course fascinated by her and managed to see every show of the circus's week in the town — or at least that part containing Lisa's act. In between shows he spent time with her or did what he could to scrounge money to spend on her. He said they made quite a Mutt and Jeff team — he so large, strong, and she so small — but that didn't bother him. I suppose he fell in love with her, though he never would have said so around me. Maybe they had sex, too, but I don't think so."

"Can they — Venusians and us

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have sex together?"

"Some Venusians've married Earth people, according to a few sources, and they had children; so I suppose there was some sex involved. Whatever happened between them, Lisa seems to have been fond of my father; else why would she have revealed her origin to him? Venusians don't go around telling everybody they're Venusians; they're not that sort. Anyway, the point is that she told him and that he believed her. Or was willing to believe her. He realized the absurdity of her revealing herself as a visitor from Venus; yet she seemed truthful in all other things. So he could not discount what she said out of hand."

Nor could I, listening to Masha or Eli. He had always dealt seriously with serious topics before. He was an intellectual, the Edmund Wilson of my generation. Besides, I liked beliving in Venusians.

"But Lisa said, 'Don't worry if you do not believe me, I can show you — take my hand.' He took her hand and she told him to shut his eyes. She muttered something in a language he could not understand, and there was a period afterward when he lost all concept of time and space. It was something like putting your head under water and still being able to breathe, he said. Then her voice seemed to come to him from far off; she told him to open his eyes. When he did, he realized immediately that he had been transported elsewhere. He never knew how the transportation was achieved, whether she did something to him so he would not be aware of a ride in a spaceship, or whether what he saw was created in his mind by her through some sort of telepathy. Whatever it was, it was Venus. He was on Venus, or being shown Venus, he was sure of that."

I had a rehearsal to get to and was dimly aware of a sense of priority, but I could not leave Ira or Yasi on just that note.

"He said he could never quite describe Venus to me. Part of it was density, air so thick he could never have breathed it without Lisa's help. She had adapted him somehow for it. There was much greenery, but not much of it was actually green. Other colors predominated — reds and purples and colors not from our spectrum, it seemed. A great deal of it, he said, was like what you saw when you pressed your fingers against your closed eyelids. Speckles and bursts and that sort of thing. Yet he could immediately make sense out of it. Lisa's help again, he said.

"He removed his attention from the scenery and looked down at her hand still holding his. It was a different hand, humanoid but different. Delicate in shape with obvious-

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ly retractable digits. For a moment he was terrified to look at the rest of her. He had had some unpleasant premonitions about what a Venusian might look like. But when he finally got up the courage to look, he was neither fearful nor disappointed. She was both recognizably Lisa and recognizably Venusian. She did not have the soft dark hair she had on Earth; Venusians have no hair at all. And the shade of her skin was a bluish grey. And her eyes were large and seemed quite colorless. And her nose was broader, less delicate. And her neck was retracted into her shoulders. But these were smaller differences than they may sound, at least they seemed to my father. Perhaps she had somehow helped him to see her as a fellow Venusian would. However it happened, he was still struck by her beauty.

"It seemed to my father that they spent quite a long time on Venus. Although, amazingly, they were actually gone from Earth only a short time. That's why I've always thought telepathic suggestion on Lisa's part was the strongest possibility. It accounts best for the brevity of time. Or it could have been, I suppose, a matter transmitter. A matter transmitter could explain the short time passing. Anyway, during that apparently long period, Lisa led him through the Venusian equivalents of meadows and glades. She said she could not take him to a city — he would not be accepted there and, in fact, might be disposed of. But, she explained, by taking his hand she could enable them to travel more quickly than he could have alone. And she was able to show him a large segment of the planet.

"He said most of the time was like a sightseeing trip. She pointed things out to him, and he promptly forgot what she'd said. What he told me was more the impressions he'd returned with and not the result of specific information supplied by Lisa. But at one point the trip was not so peaceful. They were in an area where the air was dotted with fine orange specks, where the landscape was lush and crossed by a small brook, where odors were perfume and tastes delicious. Suddenly there was a quiet sound, hardly more than a suppressed growl. Lisa startled backward in fright. My father asked her what was the matter. She said, in a trembling voice, that the growl came from a predator, one for whom she had no defense. There was nothing she could do against it, she said. Since my father could not see the predator — if it was even apparent, he would have had difficulty separating it from the strange backgrounds. Yet he could hear it obviously coming closer. So he got Lisa to describe it for him.

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All he remembered later of her description was that the predator was a bit smaller than a man or a Venusian, with lengthened arms which it used to propel itself through the vegetation. The arms hardly ever touched ground and they could be fashioned by the creature into hard-pointed sword-like appendages which it could aim with unfailing accuracy into the head and brain of its natural enemies, the Venusians. Lisa cowered in fear, saying there was no chance for her survival. My father just muttered that the creature was not ready to encounter a human and that just might be to their advantage.

"It was nerve-racking, he said, waiting for the creature to strike. It seemed to circle and circle, get closer and closer, without deciding to make its move. Lisa said the circle was maintained even if its potential victim moved. Running, the prey still heard its killer circling. Gradually the volume of the creature's stalking noise increased, until it was a frightening howl. Just before it was ready to strike, it stopped the howl and there followed long seconds of miserable silence, as Lisa seemed to give up and begin to fall.

"In an instant the predator made its move. My father barely had a chance to see it coming. Its swordlike arm was of course directed right at Lisa's head. My father said he thought it had little or no awareness of his presence — perhaps its sensory apparatus was not keyed to human signals. As the creature lunged, my father also leaped. Pushing Lisa to the side with his legs, he grabbed at the creature's arm with both hands. He could not believe the thing's strength. He was only just able to deflect its course, so that it missed Lisa's head by inches. Then, he said, he was possessed by what must have been hysterical strength. He maintained his grip on the attacker's arm, holding it down even as he felt it cut through his skin. The creature struggled to continue forward, perhaps not believing that its arm had actually been sent off-target. My father made a grab at its head. Its arm was so long, my father said, that he shouldn't've been able to even reach its head under normal conditions. But he did and instinctively he pulled at the section of head he held. Some of the skin came away in his hand. Without thinking it out, he began to rain blows on the creature's head, which turned out to be as soft as gelatin. The entire creature suddenly grew limp and fell away from him. My father never was sure how he did it — perhaps he got through to the brain or some other vital place — but whatever he did, the result was

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death to the creature. In good time, too, he said. Its other arm had also formed the sword point and would no doubt have disposed of my father easily.

"When he realeased the dead attacker, he found that both his hands were all cut up and bloodied. Lisa, recovering herself, merely touched them and they were cured. Then she came into his arms and kissed him. She had not said a word since the attack ended. From the way my father talked about the kiss, there must have been something strange and special about it, but he never said what. In the same way that they'd come to Venus, they returned to Earth. My father opened his eyes to see Lisa back in human form, tiny and in her circus outfit."

Ira or Eli stopped talking. I knew I was way late for my rehearsal, but I had a theory.

"If the trip to Venus was Lisa's telepathic suggestion, as you believe, why would she have set up such an attack?"

"What? Oh. Um, I imagine to show my father something of himself, or herself, or a less attractive aspect of Venus. How do I know why? You're right, it probably wasn't telepathic suggestion, good point."

"I didn't say it wasn't telepathy, I just —"

"Well, how do I know how it was? I only have it all second hand from my father. My mother said it was hogwash. She stood in her frumpy balloon of a housedress, waved a dripping soup spoon at him, and told him to shut up his mouth."

Another silence.

"What happened to Lisa?"

"He didn't know. The circus left town and she hadn't told him it was going to. He found out its next destination and scraped together the money to go there. When he reached the circus lot, he was told there wasn't an aerialist named Lisa with that circus and never had been. He tried to tell them that he understood about the Venusians' protecting of each other in show-biz milieus and that it was all right to tell him where she was, but they had him thrown off the lot and run out of town."

"So he never saw her again."

"Well, once he thought he saw her as part of a TV act, maybe on *Big Circus*. I wasn't there, I don't watch TV, but he said, if it was, she was still young. I asked why he didn't go to Philadelphia, where the program originated, and ask about her. But he just sort of brushed me off."

The Edmund Wilson of our generation looked petulant as he continued to toy with the pepper and salt shakers. He had collected four of them. He seemed perched

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on the seat of his wheelchair.

"Maybe she's, Lisa's still around somewhere."

"Maybe. I just wanted to tell you about it. I meant to tell you about it."

"Or maybe she's back on Venus."

"Who knows?"

"Your father, you never mentioned, is he still — still around, alive?"

"Vaguely."

"What does he do?"

"Eats. Drinks. Works a night shift. Sends me money."

"Oh, yeah, well —"

"Tells my mother I'm her fault. Says there are Communists infiltrated down at the plant. Runs with a street gang —"

"I got to get to a rehearsal. I'll —"

"Good-by."

As I left the table, I noticed that a couple of fraternity types at the next table had been close enough to hear most of what we said. They were whispering to each other.

8

Tony beat me up for hinting that the murder of an alien might be aberrant behavior. Bruno pulled him away, saying there was no point in fighting among ourselves when it was so important we should stick together, but he did not act until he was certain that Tony had sufficiently hurt me. At some point of the scuffle, Tony had ripped my sweater in the front. A triangular piece hung open like a flap. Modestly I tried to put it back in place. My gesture was not only ineffective, it agitated what felt like a broken rib.

"Sorry, pal," Tony said.

"We got to go, Tone."

"No, let's wait, get the next one when he comes."

"No can do. Contract is only for one, only a single payment."

"Ah —"

"That's the way it is now. Too many screwups with second hits, nobody ever gets three in a row. They're too smart. Nobody's greedy, c'mon. So long as we pick 'em off one by one, that creates waves. We'll get 'em all somehow, get 'em to leave for good anyway."

"Yeah, in a —"

"Tony, just shut up. You get to be number-one boy on a job, you can make decisions for second kills. Right now, the rule is, split while the splitting's good."

Bruno turned to me. He held out his weapon in display position.

"Special," he said. "Made up only for them. That's what you can do with good armorers. And good shots. Tricky's what it is. We both got to fire at the same time, but that's cool. Tone and me, we're good at it."

"The best," said Tony.

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"So — now, you're in no danger. You can spill anything to anybody you want. Even the monsters. I hear they don't really understand our operations anyway — no translatable words for us."

"Why do — if you're not being secret, how come they don't come get you, take care of you?"

"That's the beauty of it, man. Try and find us. It ain't easy. Never has been. Except for a couple of failed contracts, the aliens haven't been able to get close."

"Ah, the hell with you. Who cares what guys like you do?"

"An attitude that has been good for us in the past."

Bruno smiled. A crooked smile, fuller on one side of his face than the other. For a moment, his mouth looked something like an alien's. Jesus Christ, pretty soon I was going to be equating Hollywood starlets with aliens.

"Sorry for leaning on you," Bruno said. "Has to be, all I can say. And I'm sorry I can't keep the aliens off you. They'll send in a sub for this bastard. Somebody else from high up in the command. So long as they keep the pattern of threes, they don't give a shit."

He looked down at the dead alien. It had a couple of holes in its head, no blood around the edges.

"Your job, I guess," Bruno said. "Things work out right, your visitations'll stop soon enough. C'mon, Tone."

They left as quickly as they had come.

Not long afterward, an alien pushed open the door. He saw his fellow on the floor right away. I detected no other reaction. He stepped over the body, saying:

"This will be taken care of. It would not be fitting for this to remain; we would not allow our dead to be so desecrated."

"Sir, the murderers of —"

"Burn your intestinal matter, I know everything about this. Your wretched details are unnecessary."

"But —"

"I will not hear your babbling."

He began to pace. I stood and held myself stiffly.

"Sir, what you wish I will do."

"Naturally."

He did not pace the usual length of time. Instead, he confronted me, and I was soon embraced in his thread-fingers. The flecks in his eyes began to fade as he increased the pressure of the embrace. When the emission started, I remembered the triangular tear in my sweater, Tony's legacy. For a moment, as the pain came, I thought I saw Bruno smiling in a corner of the room. But that, of course, was a mistake. The pain felt as if, inside the sweater, the emission was sliding across and down my body, but it wasn't bad. I didn't mind it.

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In which Mr. Jennings extrapolates a marriage-for-money scheme up to dizzying new heights.

Cribbing

by GARY JENNINGS

Just for a change, it was nice to wake up in a bed the size of my whole entire bedroom back home, and to step out onto the indescribable luxuriance of a wall-to-wall chinchilla carpet, and to shower in a spray of Aramis cologne, and to enfold myself in a gold-threaded cashmere dressing gown, and to have an obsequious valet — resplendent *en grande tenue* of velvet livery, powdered wig and silver buckles — bring my morning orange juice in an Orrefors crystal goblet. It was all very nice, but it rankled a little, simply because it *was* such a change from my normal, humdrum, grubby existence.

"Will you take coffee here, sir?" the valet asked. "Or will you join the master? He is breakfasting in one of the gardens."

"I'll join the, er, master," I told him. "And would you please return this to the library?" I handed him the book with which I had read myself to sleep the night before.

"When you evinced interest in that tome, sir," said the servant, handing it back with a deep bow, "the master expressed the hope that you would accept it as a gift."

Well, that was a bit of all right, I thought to myself, as I helped the valet dress me. It was a volume beyond price, an unheard-of first edition (ca 1508) of William Dunbar's bawdy ballad *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo.* Its sale would at the very least guarantee me a lifetime supply of a better brand of beans and beer than I had been used to.

I started for the door to the hall, then paused, remembering that in this house one didn't deign to walk. The door swung open and admitted a quartet of ornately costumed Orientals (each of them, I later learned, an exiled potentate),

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bearing a sedan chair so lavishly gold-leafed that I had to squint to look at it.

I ensconced myself deep in the dodo-down upholstery and was lofted out of the room. Just outside my door there stood, on a sardonyx pedestal, a diamond as big as F. Scott Fitzgerald. As a matter of fact, it was a life-size statue of Fitzgerald — one of my host's more eccentric and expensive genuflections to literature. The entire population of diamond cutters in the Benelux Union had wept silently but bitterly during the nine years it had taken them thus to desecrate the world's largest unflawed blue-white diamond.

The four smooth-gliding Orientals were merely the *upstairs* chair-bearers. At the head of the solid ivory staircase, they relinquished the sedan chair to four more musclemen, this time an African crew. Two of them were seven-foot Watusi warriors, the other two were Bandar pygmies about forty inches tall. With the giants hefting the forward poles of the chair, and the midgets the after poles, I was wafted down the stairs as airily as in a dream of levitation. At the bottom, my chair was handed over to another quartet of even-sized bearers (four ex-heavyweight champions of the world), and I was borne through the great house to the outdoors.

According to the most accurate statistics to which I have access, there are 244 men in this country possessing fortunes of thirty million dollars or more. And, according to my own experience, every single one of these multimultimillionaires employs at least 244 bodyguards just to keep people like me out of his hair.

Fortunately, I don't have to confront every nabob in the nation. My particular phase of Social Work requires me to put the bite on only those who, according to Internal Revenue records, claim no minor dependents. So my call list at present includes a mere 107 prospects. But those without children are usually without wives as well, and this tendency to hermitage tacitly implies that they don't want anyone else around either.

However, I am an expert at ingratiation; in my line of endeavor I have to be. So here I was, the house guest of one of the plutiest of these plutocrats, the incalculably wealthy August Quagmeyer, and he had already consented to spend this day listening to my charity solicitation.

My system of getting a foot into such gilded and guarded doors is to wedge my brain in instead. For example, I recently succeeded in selling my bill of goods to Spyros Eikonoklastes, the tycoon of illicit

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weapons-smuggling, by impressing him with my knowledge of his extensive collection of religious statuary. Before that I had wangled an interview with Sir Bonzer Bagshot — the expatriate Australian who made his fortune overnight by copyrighting the entire works of Shakespeare — when I disguised myself as a swagman and gallumphed through his Connecticut estate singing *Waltzing Matilda.*

Quagmeyer, as I have indicated, was bugs about Literature, and I infiltrated here in the guise of a Master Bookbinder. Aware that he prized a first English edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs,* I brought him "the genuine, mummified pelt of the 4th-century martyr Dasius," (actually a swatch of flesh-colored Naugahyde), and offered to fit the book with this appropriate binding. Quagmeyer was delighted. I did the job, too. But while he watched me stitch and glue, I gradually revealed that bookbinding was only an avocation, that my real interest was Social Work.

Being by this time in the great man's favor, I was able to make him comprehend the importance of my mission. Of course, I was careful still to salt my spiel with literary allusions; I leaned heavily on Dickens' Master Pip and Oliver Twist. Eventually, Quagmeyer proposed that I spend the night in his palatial mansion and devote the next day entirely to the detailing of my proposition.

I was sure, now, that I had him hooked. But, even so, I was alert to every new opportunity of demonstrating my hard-crammed cache of literary erudition. As the sedan chair skimmed across an emerald lawn toward a high stone wall eastward of the house, I was pleased to recognize the carvings on the wall as the graven allegoric images of Villainy, Felony, Avarice, Envy, Hypocrisy, Hatred, Sorrow, Cupidity, Old Age and Poverty.

"The Garden of Myrthe," I said gleefully, as I was gently set down at Quagmeyer's wrought-iridium table on the greensward. "From Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose.* A truly felicitous conception!"

Quagmeyer beamed with seigneurial pride. I sipped a Chiapas-brew coffee subtly laced with Kahlua and gazed about me; here I did not at all have to feign exhilaration.

Yonder was the Fountain of Narcissus, spraying not water but Goldwasser liquer, perfumed with Arpege. The golden mist settled into a five-acre, free-form pool whose surface mirrored the other wonders of the garden. There were flowers everywhere. Most of them, fittingly, were roses — tree roses, tea roses, bush roses, climbing roses, primroses, espaliered roses. (And this was February, this was

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Grosse Pointe, Michigan.) There were pink flamingos a-stilt in the pool. There were rose-pink peacocks strutting on the lawn, and fawns of the rare Japanese dappled deer peeked at me from behind the statue-carved topiary privets. Alongside Quagmeyer's chair lolled an immense but affectionate tiger, one of the blue-eyed white tigers of Rewa.

"And alle the walles with colours fyne," I quoted, sincerely impressed, "Were peynted, both text and glose, Of al the Romaunce of the Rose...."

Quagmeyer, who represented the only jarring note in this idyllic gardenscape — he made me think of suet in aspic — waved a deprecatory hand.

"It's actually the Johnny-come-lately of my gardens here. Over there to the north is Alice's Wonderland, with a Cheshire cat that really vanishes. Westward is the Garden of Cyrus, all laid out in quincunxes. Down there to the south is the Garden of Eden, but I don't go there often. The damned serpent I bought turned out to be a gravid female, and now the whole place is overrun with her squirming progeny."

"Speaking of progeny..." I pitched in.

"Ah, yes," said Quagmeyer. "Your mission. What organization did you say you represent?"

"The Crowded Crib," I said, "Incorporated."

"Good name that, for an orphanage," he said. "But you strike me as an awfully young chap to be involved in the placement of waifs,"

"I came to this work straight from college. It has been my life-long ambition." I allowed my eyes to mist over realistically. "You see, sir, I was an orphan myself. Brought up in the grinding poverty of the West Virginia coalfields. At the tender age of seven, I was already bucking a pneumatic drill in a mile-deep—"

"Yes, yes, I know," he said uncomfortably. "I own that part of the country."

"Well, you perceive my motive," I said simply. "If I can help these other poor cast-off children to find a decent home, a loving parent or two, a start in the world...."

"But why me?" asked Quagmeyer. "I don't even have a wife."

"All the more reason why you should have *someone.*"

"When I divorced my last wife," he mused reminiscently, "I swore I would never take an eleventh. D'you know, I was attracted to her because she drank nothing but Chivas Regal's best forty-year-old Scotch. Evidence of sublime good taste, I thought. But then — *then* — I discovered, too late, that she was smoking

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mentholated cigarettes while she drank it! Egad!" He shuddered violently. "Settled fifteen million on her and sent her packing. Fend for yourself, I told her, and I hope you end up on the pavements."

"She should!" I said feelingly, and shuddered with him in empathy.

For a little while, we sat and toyed silently with the Curacao crepes, the pomegranate marmalade and the rashers of unborn baconlet.

"It occurs to me," said Quagmeyer at last, "that you are aiming rather, well, *high* with your placement service. I mean, aren't orphans usually adopted by bourgeois, childless couples...?"

"Too true, sir," I said. "But I figure, if I can give a child a start in life, why settle for less than the best? I'll grant you, the Crib's executives were dubious, too, when I proposed my intentions. But I have placed twenty-five children so far — all of them girl children, by the way — in the finest homes in the land. So the board has come around to my way of thinking. Now I am allowed to cull from our institution the most beautiful, the brightest and healthiest of all our children. I would not think of offering someone like you, sir, anything but a veritable angel."

"An angel," he murmured, probably envisioning it flitting about his Garden of Eden. Before he could also think of the lurking snakes and reconsider, I hastily interposed:

"Just imagine having a real live Alice for your Wonderland!"

A beatific smile slowly oozed across his pasty face. "Did you have a particular Alice in mind?" he asked dreamily, and I knew I had him.

I handed over a sheaf of photographs from my inside pocket. I had become so enamored, personally, with the scope of the Quagmeyer estates that I had privately decided to give him one of the Crib's truly choicest specimens. He gazed at her photos with unconcealed adoration.

"Seven years old, the ideal age for an Alice," I said. "Her name is Willow Willoughby. She'd be proud — and so will you be, I'm sure — to change it to Willow Quagmeyer."

My intention to procure for the Crowded Crib's derelict children nothing less than the best (as I had so glibly expressed it to his nibs) was not unalloyed altruism. Oh, I like little girls, all right; but I prefer them to be little nineteen-year-old girls. My efforts on behalf of such as Willow Willoughby were actually an overt expression of my own ulterior dreams of riches untold.

While Quagmeyer simpered over the photographs, I looked

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about the Garden of Murthe and considered what changes I should make if it were mine. The tiger was a nice Hicksian touch, but I could not abide peacocks. And I would populate the garden with all of Chaucer's symbolic characters — Idlenesse, Sweet-Looking, Courtesy, Simplesse and all the rest — embodied in beautiful, complaisant nymphs wearing next to nothing.

Some people merely dream of great wealth, and their imaginations stop there. I knew very well what I wanted with wealth, despite the apparent unlikelihood that I would ever get it as an underpaid minion of the Crowded Crib, Inc.

Just for instance, I wanted to own an $18,000 custom-built Facel Vega and to learn to drive it like a daredevil at Nurburgring's *Fahrer-Ausbildungslehrgange der Scuderia Hanseat.*

I wanted my formal wear tailored by d'Avenza of Rome and my shirts run up by Mattistoni of ditto.

I wanted to sail my own Rybovish sports-fisher cruiser and hunt with shotguns bespoke from Boss of London.

I wanted push buttons to push my push buttons....

"You've sold me." Quagmeyer interrupted my reverie. I already knew I had. "I *was* planning," he confided, "to start a small war in Central America, but this looks like even more fun." The words were scarcely out of his mouth before I was presenting the legal documents and the fountain pen.

Having committed himself, Quagmeyer would now brook no delay. He placed at my disposal his ebony-and-platinum limousine and his chief chauffeur (formerly a second-string astronaut), and firmly commanded me to fetch his Willow-Alice *tout de suite.*

"Won't I ever see you again?" Willow sniffled, when I returned to the Crib and explained about the splendiferous new home she had just inherited.

"Oh sure," I said lightly. "I'll visit you every time I'm in that neighborhood."

This was a lie, as I had learned from sad experience with the twenty-five other little girls I had boosted into the lap of luxury. Whenever one of my wards became the scion of a Quagmeyer type, an iron — or rather, gold — curtain inevitably dropped between her and me. Henceforth, she would not be allowed to associate with an impoverished Social Worker. Henceforth, her friends and companions — and her eventual husband — would be chosen from the regal ranks of other Quagmeyers, Bagshots and Eikonklasteses. Her new father would speedily dismiss any notion of

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obligation or gratitude for my services; I would be an outsider, an underneather, and forgotten and unwelcome.

Or so the Quagmeyer types would believe. But I had concocted a slow, corrosive aqua regia to dissolve their gold curtains.

"Now I want to give you something, Willow, to remember me by," I told her when the limousine halted at the gates of the Quagmeyer demesne. I would say good-bye here and let her find her own enchanted way home, through the bosky dells and copses of the Wonderland that would be her playground from now on.

I hung a small, gold, heart-shaped locket about her neck, on a delicate but deliberately break-resistant link chain. I did not mention to Willow that the locket could be opened to disclose a photograph; she would discover that in due time.

The picture was of me — but a slightly different me. In the photo I wore a distinguished military mustache. My hairline had receded ever so fractionally, and there was just a touch of silver at my temples. An actor friend had made me up for the portrait, at my request, to give an idea of how I would look some dozen years from now — i.e., when Willow Quagmeyer would be nineteen years old.

"Promise me you'll wear it always," I urged the pretty little girl.

Her blue eyes were honest and true when she said, "I promise." And then she was gone, timidly opening the mother-of-pearl gate just a crack and setting her first hesitant foot inside Wonderland.

I had long ago determined that the only possible way for a nobody like me to acquire great wealth was to marry the daughter of a man who could bequeath it. For all I knew, Willow might grow up to look like a wart hog, and I didn't really cotton to the idea of having a father-in-law who looked like suet in aspic, but those were trivial considerations. With the riches they two would provide, I could buy all kinds of compensatory diversions.

Of course, I had to gamble that Willow, or another, or several others of her Crib-mates would succumb to the romantic enigma of the picture in the locket(s) and the engraved inscription professing eternal love. But it was my bet that, long after Willow had forgotten me, she would still look with wonder and speculation at the handsome mystery man in the locket photograph and yearn to know someday who and what he was. When I did come back into her life — a dozen years hence — I had every expectation that I would be welcome.

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Counting my chicks before they hatched?

I don't think so.

The Crowded Crib was well supplied with little girls. Willow's placement was my twenty-sixth straight success out of the total list of 107 prospective fathers-in-law. I still have eighty-one more of the prepared gold lockets handy in my attache case.

And when I say "prepared," I mean prepared for the almost certain eventuality that *some* percentage of moon-struck girls will someday inevitably make the romantic gesture of kissing the simulacrum of her Prince Charming. Every one of my locket portraits is lacquered with a liquid recommended to me (long ago, when I was a child coal-miner) by a fellow collier and fantasist; a liquid sold to me (years later, when I got to New York) by an old man in a shop "in the neighborhood of Pell Street"; a liquid guaranteed as a sure-fire love potion; a liquid informally brand-named, by those in the know, *Au Revoir*, "till we meet again."

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SPACE 1939

Alert readers will gather from the title of this piece that we are in for another season of *Space 1999.* Steel yourselves; from here on up it's downhill all the way, as Pogo used to say (or was it the other way around?).

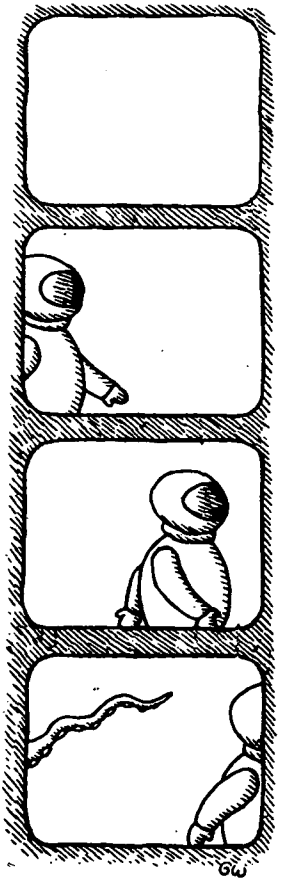
Anywho, a whole new series has been produced in England (coincidentally, production on "Year 2," as the publicists are calling it, didn't begin until it was a sure thing that the series was a moneymaker in the U.S.). There have been highly publicized changes in the format of the show, so I sat down to watch the first episode with some curiosity.

Aha! There is a new, and somewhat handsomer logo. Then we are informed that Alpha (and Luna, too, we presume) is 342 days from leaving Earth orbit. (Funny. It's seemed like years.) They've survived another space warp, and are now 6 light years from home. (There's Barbara Bain, and she has a newer, softer hairdo.)

They need titanium desperately, and so they drop in on a "nearby planet." (I begin to feel a slight sense of *deja vu.*) It's a messy place with lots of active volcanoes, but the Eagle scout reports that there is titanium, then heads home. It is followed off the surface by a glow-

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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ing green ball. (By golly, *that's* new! All the glowing balls last year were blue!) The Eagle is captured by the ball, and soon thereafter the screen on Alpha lights up, and what looks like a fugitive from Flash Gordon announces that he is "Mentor of Psychon." (Right here I begin to feel a definite sense of *deja* queasiness.)

Mentor lures a rescue party down to Psychon with a smooth manner and promises to play fair. He has a daughter, Maya, who can redo her molecular arrangement a good deal faster than most women can restyle their hair, and therefore can change into anything. It's not made clear whether this is a racial characteristic or her own peculiar talent. Whatever, she has an amazing repertory of Terran animals for somebody that's never heard of the place before. In human form, she wears a dress that continues her father's 30s theme; of silver lame to the floor, it has a maribou at the hem and down the arms (that's curly ostrich feathers, dummy) and looks like a Mae West reject for *She Done Him Wrong*. The dress disappears conveniently when Maya is gallivanting around as a lioness, or a dove, or a gorilla and, unfortunately for the randier members of the audience, reappears just as conveniently.

To make a long story short, John Koenig (according to the Space 1999 "Official Handbook," his middle name is Robert, for those of you who *really* care), Dr. Russell & Co. escape from Mentor of Psychon's nefarious clutches. This is accomplished when Koenig smashes Psyche of Psychon to bits. Who's that? Psyche is a "biological computer" that looks like masses of tubes of boiling Kool Ade, and it was to Psyche that Mentor wanted to feed the human's life force or mental energy or some such (a minimal diet, in any case). But they do it with the aid of Maya, who is a good girl despite her Mae West dress and tendency to change into a gorilla at times.

After the planet blows up, they return to Alpha, with Maya in tow — she is to become their "resident alien" i.e. a regular on the show.

There is also a subplot (and sub's the word, all right) about a newly married Alphan couple, the male part of which (of course) is on the captured Eagle scout, and the female part of which (of course) spends a good deal of time expressing anguish and fainting. They end up blowing kisses to each other through the view screen (they deserve each other).

Let's see — what else is new? I forgot to mention the BEMs. It was good to see a BEM again. They were almost as enthralling as the tentacles on last season's second show.

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And we are promised a stronger love interest between Koenig and Dr. Russell (who is female, for those who don't know. No new ground broken in *that* direction). That should really be exciting — like watching two iguanas making eyes at each other.

There seem to be newer, softer costumes to match Miss Bain's new hair style (I miss the old ones), and less large white spaces on Alpha. The handsome Alphan Paul is out, as is that old geezer, what's-his-name, who spent all his time making suggestions that no one ever took up. (I can see why he left.) The lovely Eurasian Sandra is still in, though.

Now with all these major changes, I can see why they couldn't get around to a minor matter such as getting sensible writers (preferably those cognizant with s/f) who could put out stories that at least made a try at convincing speculative concepts.

But I must say the production as a whole is as spectacular as ever, and fun to watch in a mindless way. And I must say one thing on the writers' behalf. Obviously they have been instructed by the producers to stick to the old classic series episode format, a cliff hanger before every commercial; that is, at least every ten minutes. It's like instructing a writer to write a short story with a climax to come every two pages exactly. It's hard to work sensibly within that kind of restriction.

But I'm afraid that Year 2 on Alpha looks about the same as Year 1; pretty rudimentary s/f.

As for the big screen, let me at this point back up a little on the matter concerning the last three columns, in which I reviewed three films (*Logan's Run, A Boy and His Dog, The Man Who Fell to Earth*), only one of which I had much positive to say about. But this month's entry is *Food of the Gods*, compared to which the other three are all winners. At least they are tries at

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something adventurous in filmed s/f. *Food of the Gods* is a throwback to our old and tired friend, *the giant something.* Here it's a whole host of giant somethings, which are no different from the outsized tarantulas and scorpions of our youth and the late show, with a bit of ecology blathering thrown in.

The Wells novel, by the way, which has no connection whatsoever with the plot of the film, is one of the wittiest and most evocative. Buy the book; ignore the movie.

Sincere-thanks-department... I noticed with some surprise in this year's *Locus* poll that I was named tenth most popular critic in the field. While I do a lot of book reviewing, this column is my most far-spread outlet, and I always considered myself a sort of stepchild critic since so many science fiction people regard on-screen s/f as the lowest form of the genre. So it is indeed with gratitude to you readers that I see myself proved wrong.

Current - affairs - department... The TV coverage of the Mars landing (just happening as I write this) was enthralling, and some enterprising local newspeople on a couple of stations even worked in a tribute to the science-fictional view of Mars with a visit to The Science Fiction Shop here in New York. My major thought, however, is "Dejah Thoris, where are you now that we need you?"

Things - to - come - department ...Jack Clayton, who directed *The Innocents,* that hair-raising screen version of *The Turn of the Screw,* is now going to attempt to bring Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* to the screen. And the Disney studios are rumored about to embark on an animated version of the first of Lloyd Alexander's Prydain fantasies, *The Black Cauldron.* That's all Prydain needs is some darling songs and a talking pig as cute as the three little. And how do you say Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo in Welsh?

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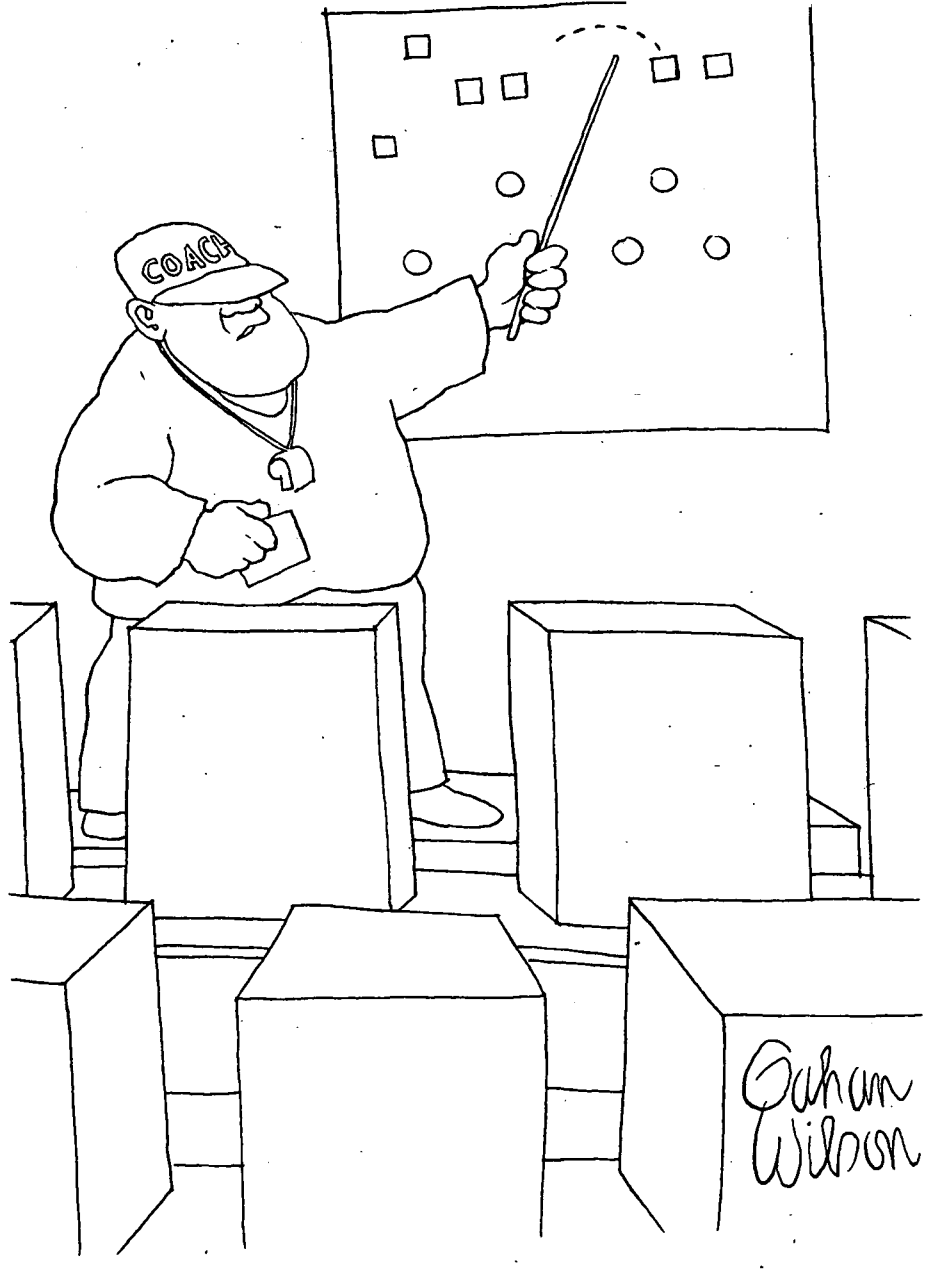

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This odd and compelling story is James Bourne's first published fiction. The author was born in 1945 in New York City, graduated from Yale in 1967 and worked for WGBH-TV (Boston) until 1970. "I've also worked in radio (mostly jazz programming) in Connecticut, Boston and Alameda, Cal. I've lived in California since 1971 and am currently in the middle of a novel . . ."

The System

by J. R. BOURNE

In a way the System was like a man-made natural law — an accidental pattern imprinted on the land, a maze, an enormous circuit diagram with gates and terminals, dead ends and great stretches of freedom where nothing would stop him at all. It existed; Newton was sure of that. He had first uncovered it in New York, on Second Avenue between Ninety-fourth and Fifty-first. He made forty-four lights in a row; not a stop, not a pause, just straight on through — so easy that it took a while for it to register. It wasn't until Seventy-ninth, fifteen blocks after he turned south on the avenue, that it dawned on him what was happening, what he might be able to do. From then on Newton drove with an alertness that was unusual even for a seasoned New Yorker, not so much an alertness for danger as it was the acceptance of a challenge. He watched for taxis creeping out of side streets, swore at the stolid trucks, delivering Knick by the case, which claimed whole lanes for themselves; and, curiously, he never enjoyed driving in New York as much as he did that afternoon. With one eye constantly on the lights at the corners — timing them, coordinating what he saw with the pressure of his foot on the accelerator — and the other watching traffic ahead of him and what was approaching in the rearview mirror, it was as if he had the avenue to himself. Even under the best of circumstances it would have been difficult, but this was almost superhuman — and, despite that, it went very nearly effortlessly. The lights kept turning green in front of him like obliging ducks toppling over in a shooting gallery. It was so perfect that he went four blocks past his destination just for the ride, and the rest of the day he felt a strange racing of his blood, as if a good-looking woman on the

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subway had smiled at him intimately.

At work the next morning he couldn't get it out of his mind. Deep in the bowels of City Hall he was once again on Second Avenue nipping off the lights one by one, no longer designing a computer filing system for the city's official documents. It was slow work, ideal for daydreaming. Since Daedalus Systems, Inc., the consulting firm he worked for, had put him in charge of the project, Newton designed the program and directed a modest-sized staff, but he couldn't ignore the fact that it was the type of job given to someone far down the ladder.

The work didn't hold his attention, but it still wasn't until a day or two later that he fully understood what had happened. He had gone forty-four blocks without hitting a light! At first the full impact of what he had done frightened him terribly. It was like the time he walked across the frozen pond when he was a kid. He made it without any trouble, but a couple of years later, thinking back on that moment for no particular reason, he remembered the almost subliminal groaning of the ice and saw all at once how easily it could have broken. It wasn't very thick. But the ice had held, although he had no idea why. Once remembered, the narrow escape was never again forgotten; and each time it came back to him, a tiny rivulet of the pond's icy water ran tauntingly down his spine. Now, years later, Newton shivered the same way as he reviewed the miraculous ride on Second Avenue. Forty-four lights! The odds against it were astronomical. He had lived in New York all his life, and nothing like that had ever happened. It went directly against the whole scheme of the city as he understood it; something like that wasn't supposed to be possible. At first he was convinced he was the pawn of an unknown anarchist god. It almost made a believer out of him.

A little while later reason prevailed, and the System began to unfold before him. The lights, he realized, were made by men. On Second Avenue they were sequenced; that was the way they were laid out. He had been lucky that day, so lucky it still scared him, but there was actually no reason he couldn't repeat it. It wasn't *all* luck. Later, that seemed to him the crucial understanding. As soon as he recognized his own part in it, he was able to make the short leap to the System. It was as if he had triggered the last mechanism that guarded its secrets. The System rolled out before him with such dizzying rapidity that he barely moved for over an hour. Suddenly he could see it all. Something — an

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equation, a formula, a program so complex that only a few might ever grasp it — had to control the traffic lights in the city, to say why one was red and another green at any particular moment, and if he could uncover the one link tying them all together, the city would open up for him like his own private expressway, infinite in length. He could go anywhere without hitting a light. Certainly not in a straight line, but it could be done. Each day the System revealed itself to hundreds, even thousands of people. The trick had been in recognizing it. Now all that remained was to discover the key by carefully observing patterns, repetitions, the city's singularities and all its obscurely related characteristics, and then to assemble from what he had observed the one formula that unified them all. It was like ten archaeologists discovering ten ruins but having to wait for the eleventh to tell them it was in fact a city. He was the eleventh. He would reveal the street plans, the grid, the beauty and intricacy of the basic structure.

Two days later he went from Ninetieth to Sixty-sixth, again on Second, and then from Bloomingdale's up to Eighty-sixth on Third. As before, it was as if the city had surrendered something to him.

For the next six months Newton prowled about town on weekends and holidays, preparing maps and diagrams as he unearthed recurring patterns, new sequences, little sections of an avenue or street where everything fell in place for him. His straight-line record remained at forty-four blocks — for some reason he was never able to top that first day — but by adding turns, carefully orchestrated perpendiculars and parallels, by applying the city's own formula as it began to emerge, he was able to run up sixty, then eighty-two, finally a litle over a hundred blocks. At the end of that period he had developed a perfect route from Pier Thirty-six to the Polo Grounds (he couldn't think of those apartment buildings as anything else) and another from Wall Street to the Grand Concourse. His diagram of the Polo Grounds route looked like the nervous tracings of a pencil along the grid of a crossword puzzle. Crosstown, he had gone from Lincoln Center to the U.N., and he had even worked out a plan for Central Park. He was beginning to understand the city.

Shortly after the second test of the Polo Grounds route (he tried it three times in all, and it worked flawlessly each time) the woman he had met in the Village moved in with him. Her name was Anita. He'd met her in a bar not long after he began working on the System. Between mappings and test runs they went to the movies on Bleecker

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Street, walked down Madison Avenue looking in shop windows, and rode the subway up to Columbia. She liked to stroll around the campus and make believe she was back in school. Sometimes they'd go to the library together and sit for a couple of hours, silent, pretending that they were studying. Anita read a magazine, and occasionally Newton brought along one of the diagrams of the System and worked on it. He never told her what it was.

The night he first met her, she was standing thoughtfully at the bar staring into a partially consumed glass of beer, seemingly lost in the world of her own reflection. Something about her appealed to him immediately. It was as if she wasn't even a part of the scene in the room: She was totally self-contained, her own universe, existing in a private dimension. This was something new, and the separateness of her world made him eager to join it. He sat on a stool next to her, observing from no distance at all, and yet she didn't seem to notice. Finally he offered to buy her another beer. For a moment he didn't think she'd heard. Either that or her private dimension was real. She just stared at the glass. He was starting to give up when she moved at last.

"Sure" was all she said.

Anita was tall and slender, and her face echoed her figure, long and thin, with eyes placed close together and a mouth with slightly pursed lips. She wore a belted cardigan that almost reached her knees, dominated by enormous pockets in which she'd hidden her wallet and also one hand. When the new beer arrived they began to talk. She worked for Chase Manhattan in the trust department. She was interested in real estate. Someday she hoped to manage one of the new condominiums in Westchester, perhaps even to invest in one. She'd studied the possibilities, and real estate seemed to offer the most security. She explained it to him in some detail. They talked for the better part of an hour, and when she left she agreed to meet him there the next night.

The following day he tried Second Avenue again. Thirty-one blocks this time. He might have done better, but a truck delivering poultry had stalled in the left lane, and Con Ed was ripping up the middle.

The bar was crowded by the time he arrived, a few minutes early for their rendezvous. Scanning the place apprehensively, Newton searched through the noise and smoke for Anita, wondering all of a sudden if he would remember what she looked like. Finally he walked over to the bar and asked for a beer. Skimming the head off with

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the side of his index finger, he glanced over his shoulder at the door. There she was, standing just inside, wearing the same cardigan and pants that fell straight from her hips. He waved, a secret gesture involving more elbow than hand, and she smiled quickly.

A week later he asked her to spend the night with him. It was right after the first real test of the System. He had driven from the Museum of Modern Art to the Guggenheim, thirty-five blocks on a line, a lot longer under the System — but nonstop. It didn't work the first time. He got hung up on Seventy-fourth Street, and it took a couple of checks through the diagrams before he saw the wrong turn he'd made at Seventy-first. The second time it worked without a hitch, and he knew he had it at last.

Later that night Anita had undressed herself slowly in the half light by his bookcase. She undressed with her back to him ignoring him already naked on the bed, sliding pants carefully to the floor, unhooking her bra with precise fingertips, finally turning to him and coming to bed without a word. Her breasts were small and her hips narrow and smooth, and they made love soundlessly next to the window that opened out over West Eighty-third.

From then on his time was divided between Anita and the System, with the two overlapping only on the afternoons they spent together at Columbia. But whenever they went somewhere in a cab, Newton unconsciously watched the lights, looking for hidden patterns; or, by himself, while he combined and sifted his information, a minute here or there would disappear completely as his thoughts drifted to Anita. Sometimes it seemed that the work was progressing more slowly than it should. The Polo Grounds route took over two months to get down correctly, and during that time they saw each other sometimes once a week, at other times three or four times a week, but never on weekends. That time belonged wholly to the System, to his calculations, his maps, the diagrams that included almost every light in the city. He had finally explained that it was something he was "working on," and that was how it stood until early June, when the Dodgers came to town for a four-game stand with the Mets at Shea Stadium.

Anita, of all things, was a Mets fan. Not just a fan, a fanatic. She had followed them ever since the team was assembled from parts as suited to each other as the various organs of Dr. Frankenstein's monster. She had even remained faithful when they showed signs of

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turning into a ball club, when Ron Hunt made the starting All-Star team; and, unlikely as it sounded, she had wept for two days after they took the Series four games to one from the Orioles.

One night, with misgivings, she brought up the Dodgers series. She was afraid Newton would guard his weekend time jealously, but instead he suggested they go to a game. It seemed to him like a good time to give Anita a surprise demonstration of the System. With the Polo Grounds route nearly completed he was sure enough of being on the right track. He knew he would have it soon. He was beginning to approach the city with a confidence that would have astonished him a short time before. Having no doubts that he could whip up a quick trial run, he set aside an afternoon a couple of days before the Sunday double-header. What he came up with was brief, not much over fifty blocks; but it would do.

Anita was puzzled when he insisted on driving out to the stadium, even more so when he told her to be ready two hours before game time. One would have been plenty.

The first half of the drive went almost like a military maneuver, so intent was Newton on the route, one he'd had to memorize on very short notice. He hardly paid her any attention. Once or twice, as he dodged a particularly slow car and again as he cut in front of a heavily laden truck, she dug her heels into the floor and looked at him in alarm. He noted her expression out of the corner of his eye, gave her a quick reassuring smile, and sped on. Very few words were spoken.

"Where are we going?" she asked when he made the first of what eventually became dozens of seemingly unnecessary turns.

"You'll see," he said confidently.

At the end of the demonstration Newton pulled over to the curb and glanced expectantly at Anita. She looked as if she had just come off one of the rides at Coney Island.

"What do you think?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, we finally got here," she answered, catching her breath and looking around to see just where that was. "What was that all about? That was the longest nonstop ride I've ever taken."

"That's it!"

"What is?"

He began to explain excitedly.

"No stops. That's my System. I've got it worked out so that I can go just about anywhere without hitting a stoplight. I've almost got the city figured out. This was just a hint. I can go a lot farther."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"Do you mean to tell me that

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this is what you've been doing all this time? All these weekends? You've been out dodging stoplights?"

"No, no, it's a system. You get nothing but green lights. There's a pattern, you see, and all you have to do is find it. The lights are always the same." He tugged at the wheel, eager for her to understand. "It's like a man who never changes his habits. Once you've got his pattern down, you can anticipate everything he does. Only in this case the lights are even more predictable. More complicated perhaps, but more predictable too, more regular. The pattern is *there*; it'll work anywhere in the city. Pretty soon I won't even need a map."

She looked at him wide-eyed and shook her head.

"You must be out of your mind."

But later, when he asked her to move into his apartment, the doubts of that Sunday were gone. Not realizing what the System meant to him (nor did he at the time), she saw the future as clear. As for Newton, he had a vague notion that he was keeping open an option that he had neglected until then.

The apartment was small, and her things filled up most of his closet and spilled out of the dresser into various corners of the rooms. She brought with her an electric hairstyling kit that made the television go fuzzy, a complete set of Edith Wharton (including two copies of *Ethan Frome,* one of them underlined and filled with marginalia as a legacy of her schooldays), and a giant Mets banner that was eventually hung vertically on the inside of the bathroom door. It stared at him relentlessly every time he took a crap.

For several weeks they spent virtually all of their free time together, at first riding the subway down to the Village to join friends at the bar where they'd met. But it wasn't long before the place bored them, and one night something happened on the return trip that made them decide not to go back.

An old Puerto Rican who was slumbering at one end of their subway car had suddenly opened his eyes and fixed them with a bitter stare. Lurching to his feet, he swayed down the center of the car until he was standing not very upright before them. With his eyes flickering over them in a kind of palsied dance and his brow deeply furrowed in the middle, he looked as if he was preparing a lengthy mental indictment, first in Spanish, then translating it laboriously to English. It was a slow process, and he didn't say anything for at least a full minute. He stood over them, his jacket caked with dried oil, his

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pants torn through in several spots, and a heavy stench seemed to roll off him with every motion of the car. Anita turned away and held onto the arm that lay rigid next to her. Finally the old man spoke.

"Your city," he said disgustedly in a thick, drunken, songlike accent, "you think this is your city." He shook his head so forcefully that the motion almost keeled him over. "It ain't your city." He thumped his chest importantly. "Mine."

He staked his claim by spitting disdainfully at their feet and then turned back toward his end of the car. Moving like a child's top with its momentum virtually exhausted, he teetered dangerously the entire length of his passage, yawing erratically about an axis that wouldn't hold still. At last, having regained his seat, he fell at once into the deep slumber he had interrupted for his unexpected journey.

With their assailant again unconscious the two relaxed. Anita laughed nervously, as if to say it was all a mistake, but she couldn't ignore the moist sickly green lump at their feet. She shuddered and sank her fingers into Newton's coat. A woman in the next seat leaned over toward them.

"The city," she said knowingly, "it's full of crazy people."

After that they avoided the Village, settling on a place called Rico Reid's, a small bar on First Avenue at midtown. The drinks were good, and three nights a week there was music by a tenor saxophonist and guitar. Back in the forties the tenor player had been known as one of the disciples of Lester Young, and with the passage of time, with Pres dead, he had become an Old Master in his own right. The place was crowded every time he played.

On the nights that there was music at Rico Reid's they left the apartment early, arriving at the club around eight thirty. Anita slid into a chair at one of the tables near the tiny bandstand while Newton went to the bar for a pitcher of beer and a couple of sandwiches. Later, around eleven, once the tenor player had his lip warmed up and the empty glasses were beginning to accumulate at his feet, they sent him a note by one of the waiters. *Play "Come Rain or Come Shine,"* it always said, and there was always a fresh glass accompanying it. The tenor man obliged gladly, the tune being one of his favorites, and played the lovely ballad with a combination of wistfulness and passion that perfectly suited the music and its lyrics. Newton and Anita usually left a short time later. Back in the apartment Newton put on a record of "Come Rain or Come Shine"

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that the tenor player had cut ten years earlier, and they made love by the light that passed through the Venetian blinds like a soft-edged grid pattern on their bodies. It came to be a ritual for them: Rico Reid's in the evening, sex at midnight, he falling asleep with a hand on her breast, she with her fingers on the inside of his thigh.

Through all this time the System rested undistrubed and uncompleted in one of the drawers of his desk. He had run the third test of the Polo Grounds route on Saturday afternoon while Anita was shopping. It worked perfectly, just as it had twice before, but he never took the next step. He never combined all his diagrams, the calculations, the figures he had accumulated over the months, and worked them through until they gave him the one formula that would solve New York for him. Newton stopped short, one step shy of his goal, distracted for the moment by the novelty and excitement of having Anita with him. At first he wasn't aware of what he had set aside, but as the summer drew to a close, the silences at breakfast grew longer. Anita took to following the real estate markets, and Newton, having cleared away only a little of City Hall's mountain of paper, found that he was sleeping badly, dreaming most of the night of vast flat expanses of desert, unscarred except by the black line of a road. It was a road whose only turns (and there were many) were right angles, although for some reason it felt as if there were none. He drove the road every night, taking each of the thousands of turns without any reduction in speed, without the change of direction pushing him to one side or the other, without any sensation at all, just as if he was driving down a perfectly straight piece of road. The whole experience was paradoxical, illogical, even a little unsettling, but it gave his dream self a great feeling of freedom and left him exhausted when he awoke.

One morning they had a fight. A few hours later he couldn't even remember what it had been about — something to do with not wanting to go somewhere — but it was enough to make Anita storm out of the apartment. In a fury Newton grabbed the raw material of the System out of his desk drawer and began to work on it. By the time she returned that evening he had totally forgotten their disagreement. He had New York in his hand. It took a full page of figures and diagrams to get it down on paper, but the work was complete, even condensable so that he could carry what he needed in his head. No proof was necessary; he was certain he could now go

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anywhere in the city without stopping for a traffic light.

Anita was surprised and at first dismayed by his elation. Newton waved the paper giddily in front of her.

"This is it!" he cried like a child at a big parade. "This is it! This is New York City!"

He tested it anyway, and it was absurdly easy. New York opened up for him like a willing lover, an endless thoroughfare whose every turn was dictated by the set of calculations he carried in his head. It was so perfect that he played with it ceaselessly, the way a cat plays with a newly killed bird — driving from one end of Manhattan to the other, making great unfettered swings through the Bronx and Brooklyn, uptown, downtown, and crosstown. New York was his. He even thought of writing an article for the *Scientific American* explaining the System, even wrote the first page before abandoning the effort because for some reason it wouldn't translate to prose. Anita began to wonder if she was living with a lunatic.

"Who cares?" she would shout in exasperation. "So what if you never have to stop for a light? Why don't you do something useful? Why don't you figure it out so we don't have to pay the phone bill?"

Invariably he would try to explain to her.

"Don't you see?" he would say desperately, knowing perfectly well that she didn't. "This is the key to the city. I've got the city figured out. I've *beaten* it!"

Even so, there was still something missing. New York was complete, but the System wasn't. He could see hints of possibilities beyond what he had already accomplished. Where it led he wasn't sure, but a feeling of dissatisfaction pulled at him constantly. One weekend, hoping to distract himself, he decided to try Boston.

Newton didn't really expect that the System, or at least New York's version of it, would work for Boston, and he was right. He had to start all over again. Going up every weekend, sometimes in the name of business (a ploy which rarely fooled Anita, who occasionally went with him although she refused to join him on his wanderings through the old streets), he began making calculations and diagrams of the Hub, just as he had in New York, except that this time he had the advantage of knowing what to look for. Boston only took a month and a half.

After that came Hartford. Driving home from Boston one weekend, he had seen the golden dome of the capitol building from the eastern bank of the Connecticut River, and the obvious thought lept

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into his mind: Here was another city. By then he had it down to a science; a thoughtful and not quite random sample of the city's streets was all he needed to unlock its secret. Hartford was smaller than New York or Boston, and he knew exactly what he wanted. It really took no time at all. In the end the formula required only a couple of lines in his notebook.

From then on things began to accelerate. Anita didn't like his being away as much as he was. Sometimes he was gone for several weekends in a row, sometimes even during the week, because he had finally seen what the System really promised. It wasn't just the cities; Newton was confident he could break the code of any city in the country within a month, although he was half afraid that Los Angeles would defy any attempts at finding the logic in its tortured geometry. By now he realized that he could go beyond the cities, that he could interpret the space *between* them as well. He could go anywhere in the country nonstop, and, more important than that, he was sure he could find the single massive equation that tied the coasts together, that linked the northern and southern borders, that filled in all the space in his Rand McNally map and gave it form. Just as there had been a key to New York and Boston and Hartford, there had to be a key to the whole United States. At first the enormity of the idea overpowered him so completely that he sat motionless in the apartment for three or four days glued to the TV, afraid to face what he had seen.

Once he recovered he tried out the idea between Boston and New York. It worked. He drove from the Chelsea Naval Hospital over the Mystic River Bridge, through the city, past university undergraduates who didn't even notice him (and, he mused, had no idea what he was up to), then along the Massachusetts Turnpike with a quick stop for food and gas at Stafford Springs in Connecticut, through Hartford, I-91 to New Haven, and along the Sound to New York, ending at the foot of Wall Street. It worked. Newton repeated the words to himself again and again. It worked. Just like the initial discovery it frightened him, and memories of the frozen pond of his childhood came back to haunt him. This time, though, he didn't stop.

He went down to the auto club and came back with enormous highway maps of the country, which he pinned to the wall over the TV set. On the nights that they sat together in the flickering darkness Anita was sure that Newton wasn't looking at the screen at all, that he was looking a few degrees above it,

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at the maps. He had the route all picked out. Most of the time it followed Highway 80, right across the heart of the country, but he had thrown in a few variations. It started in New York, crossed the George Washington Bridge and headed through New Jersey, then along the Delaware River and into East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, across the Susquehanna, over the Appalachians, through the little town of Nectarine, into Ohio and north to Cleveland. From there he would take 71 to Columbus and Cincinnati, 74 to Indianapolis and Peoria, and rejoin 80 just east of Moline. Crossing the Mississipi at Davenport in Iowa, he'd go west through Omaha, then Wyoming and Nevada, entering California at Truckee, just north of Lake Tahoe. Finally he'd drop steadily south and west, through Roseville and Sacramento, into Berkeley, and across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco. The route was traced with marker pen on the biggest map.

At the same time he wrote letters to the chambers of commerce in each of the towns along the way. Soon the walls were papered with individual street maps, their surfaces veined with possible routes marked in colored felt pen.

As he collected what he called his "data," Anita started to drift away from him. She spent a couple of weekends with her sister in Tarrytown and went out by herself one night while he was working over his maps. For the winter quarter she enrolled in a night course on real estate management. Finally she began sniping at the System.

"You're deluding yourself. There's no System; there's no pattern to the cities. You can't spend all your time on this idiotic project; it's nothing but a big waste. There's *nothing there!*"

It made him angry when she talked that way, but most of the time he just shrugged and went back to the maps. When he did answer he always said the same thing.

"It works."

Newton was sorry that she was going away from him, that the distance between them was increasing with each day, but there was nothing he could do. She was warm in his arms, but she wasn't perfect or essential, not like the System. The System had to be completed. He was having the desert dream again, and each morning he woke up disappointed that it hadn't been real. During the day, as he sorted yellowed documents at work, the pattern would suddenly appear to him like the chance reflection of morning sunlight off a spider's web; and just as he thought he

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might grasp it, it would disappear.

Sometimes Anita almost seemed to understand. One night as they were lying together without having made love, she rolled over on her side and propped herself up on one elbow. The streetlight from below, reflected off the building across the way, fell softly on her shoulders and breasts. Her nipples were dark and firm, and her skin was smooth like a memory. Newton stared at the ceiling without seeing her.

"Babe," she asked quietly, "where are you tonight?"

He was in Cincinnati, wondering how he would make the light at Seventh and Race.

When spring came around he quit his job, halfway through the LaGuardia administration, and Anita hit the roof.

"You what? Oh, for Christ's sake, now I know you're crazy!"

After a while she began to cry.

"Babe, I swear to God," she said between sobs, "I'm not going to take this much longer."

That night they went to Rico Reid's for the first time in three or four months. The tenor player was on the stand, but when they got back to the apartment, Anita realized that they had forgotten to ask for "Come Rain or Come Shine."

"You know," Newton said as they slid under the blankets, "You could always come along."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"What for?"

By the time the ponds began to thaw in the parts of Connecticut where he tested his ideas, Newton was ready to go. All the maps were in order, and he had rigged up a huge scroll in the passenger's seat on which he had a continuous map of the entire transcontinental journey. He expected it would take him at least two months to get to San Francisco, decoding each town and city along the way, but the return leg would be nonstop. With the System finished at last, he would have no restrictions.

Anita awoke one morning to find him packing clothes into a couple of small valises. It took a minute for her to realize what was happening, and meanwhile he pretended not to notice that she was awake. Finally she sat up in bed, letting the sheet fall to her waist, her nakedness causing a sudden regret to cut through him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It's time to go," he said, closing the last bag.

"Oh my God."

She watched in mute sadness as he carried the bags out of the apartment to the elevator. When he returned a couple of minutes later, she was dressed. She looked even thinner than when he met her, as if

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the will had been drained from her body.

"There's a System," she said unsurely, her voice revealing that she was beginning to understand for the first time.

"That's right."

She followed him down in the elevator and watched as he stowed the last things in the car and propped up the scroll in the seat next to him. As he slid under the wheel, she turned away suddenly.

"I should be back sometime in May," Newton said, fitting the key into the ignition. "It'll be all right after that."

Slowly she turned back to him. When she spoke there was resignation in her voice.

"Babe," she said, "I'm going to leave you."

He nodded, but his words, if he said any, were lost in the roar of the car's engine.

Down at the corner the light turned green.

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THE SEA-GREEN PLANET

I had arrived at a certain university some time ago in order to give a talk, and I was being guided about the place by a young woman who was a student at the institution.

She was approaching a swinging door in advance of me when a tall young man (presumably another student) cut her off, went through, and allowed the door to swing back violently, catching her in the chest and sending her staggering backward.

Rather annoyed, I went through the swinging door at a run and called after him loudly, "Well done, big shot. Good work."

He stopped cold and slowly turned, his eyebrows coming together in a frown and his lips twisted in a scowl. Perhaps he didn't know to what I was referring, but he must have gathered from my expression that I disapproved of him.

He approached menacingly and, since I didn't know what else to do, I stood my ground.

He said, "Something eating you, mister?"

"Not really," I said. "It's just that you went through that door and let it swing back and knock a girl over, and I wanted to congratulate you on your markmanship."

Apparently, the young man was

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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not accustomed to sarcasm delivered in a pleasant tone of voice. He brooded about it, groped for some phrase from his limited armory and said, "Watch your (expletive deleted) language, mister."

"Very well," I said. "Of which of the words that I used do you disapprove?"

That stopped him again, so he reached for another phrase. "I don't like your manner, mister."

There he stood, six inches taller than myself, and considerably less than half my age. Hoping fervently that my gray hairs would protect me, I smiled and said, "And what do you plan to do about it?"

Actually, I was very nervous concerning what plans he might have, but, to my relief, he said, "It so happens I don't believe in physical violence."

"Good!" I said. "Then why did you knock down the young woman?"

"That was an accident," he said.

"I haven't heard you apologize."

He looked at me, he looked at the young woman (who was even more fearful of my being broken in two than I was, since she was in charge of me) and then, unable to think of any alternative to apology but flight, turned and strode away.

It was very distressing. I cling rather wistfully to the theory that everyone is nice, so that nasty people tend to upset my Universe. And yet, when I'm being rational about it, I *know* that there are nasty people here and there on Earth, even among scientists.

Consider the case of Nice Guy Adams and Nasty Guys Challis and Airy—

When Isaac Newton had worked out his theory of gravitation, the equation he produced applied to a situation in which only two bodies were involved. If the Moon and the Earth were the only bodies in the Universe, Newton's equation would describe the path of the Moon and the Earth about their common center of gravity with great precision. The "two-body problem" is solved.

As soon as you deal with three bodies — say the Moon, the Earth and the Sun — their motions cannot be expressed *exactly* by Newton's equation or by any equation developed since. The "three-body problem" is still not solved.

Actually, that doesn't matter, except to the theoreticians. Even though the Universe contains not merely three bodies, but countless trillions of them, Newton's equation still works well enough.

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If you want to determine the Moon's motion around the Earth, you first work it out as though only the Moon and the Earth exist. That gives you a very good first approximation.

You then calculate the much smaller effects of more distant bodies. Since the gravitational pull falls off as the square of the distance and since all other astronomical bodies are much farther from the Earth and the Moon than those two bodies are from each other, you expect the other effects to be small.

The Sun is so large that even at its great distance its gravitational pull is significant. As the Moon moves in its orbit about the Earth, it is sometimes a little closer to the Sun than Earth is, sometimes a little farther than Earth. The two bodies feel the Sun's gravitational pull to a slightly, and changeably, different amount. This introduces a small modifying effect on the Moon's motion that can be calculated for.

The still smaller pull of Venus, varying with the distance of that planet from the Earth and the Moon, can also be allowed for. So can the pull of Mars, the pull of Jupiter and so on.

To allow for all these pulls on the Moon, in all their variations with time, produces an approximate equation (never an exact one) that is enormously complicated, and so Newton said the problem of the Moon's motion was the only one that ever made his head ache.

These various minor pulls that cause an orbital motion to vary somewhat from what it would be if the two neighboring bodies were the only ones in existence are called "perturbations."

Theoretically, every object in the Universe can produce a perturbation affecting the motion of every other body. In practice, the more massive the body being perturbed, the less massive the body doing the perturbing, the greater the distance between the two — the smaller the perturbation. The perturbing effect on a planetary probe on the planet it passes, or the perturbing effect of the star Aldebaran on the Moon, are immeasurably small and can be dismissed.

Using Newton's equation and allowing for all perturbations of reasonable size, the motion of the various planets and satellites of the Solar system could be worked out with reasonable precision. From Mercury to Saturn all the worlds marched across the sky just about as the equation would predict. The astronomers of the early decades of the 1800s had instruments that could make close measurements; Newton's equation fit within those measurements, and they were happy.

But what about Uranus? That was a planet that had not been known

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in Newton's time; that had only been discovered in 1781*. Would Newton's equation fit there?

It seemed to be a rather simple case, since Uranus, far out on the edge of the Solar system was far away from the perturbing influences. The known body closest to Uranus was Saturn which, at its closest, was 1,500,000,000 kilometers from it. The known body next closest to Uranus was Jupiter which, at its closest, was 2,100,000,000 kilometers from it.

This meant that in calculating the orbit of Uranus about the Sun, one had to allow for a small perturbing effect from Saturn and a small perturbing effect from Jupiter, and that was all. All other bodies in the Universe, as far as was known, were too small, too distant, or both too small and too distant, to produce perceptible perturbations.

So Uranus's motion across the sky was watched with interest and its position compared to theory from year to year.

But then came trouble. In 1821, the French astronomer, Alexis Bouvard, collected all the observations of Uranus deliberately made since its discovery and accidentally made before its discovery, when it was occasionally entered into the star charts as a star. He tried to fit this to the calculated orbit of Uranus and it wouldn't fit. He recalculated the perturbing effect of Jupiter and Saturn with great care, and still the actual position of the planet refused to coincide with the calculated position.

The difference between the actual position Uranus occupied and the theoretical position it was supposed to occupy, was never very great — not more than 2 minutes of arc, or 1/15 the apparent diameter of the Moon — but you don't pay off on "never very great." What astronomers wanted was "vanishingly small."

How to account for Uranus's behavior?

One possible explanation was that Newton's equation was slightly wrong. According to that equation the strength of gravitational pull between two bodies fell off as the square of the distance between their centers. This is the "inverse square law."

But suppose the gravitational fall-off was not *quite* as the square of the distance. Suppose the factor were not d^2 but $d^{2.0001}$ or $d^{1.9999}$. In that case there would be a discrepancy between the calculated motion obtained through use of the inverse square law and the real motion that depended on the slightly different law. What's more, the greater the distance between two bodies, the greater the discrepancy.

*See *THE COMET THAT WASN'T*, November, 1976.

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Out as far as Saturn, the discrepancy, if any, had to be small enough to escape detection since all the large bodies out at that point followed their calculated paths with precision. At the distance of Uranus from the Sun (twice that of Saturn), the discrepancy might have expanded to the point of detectability. Furthermore, the distances between Uranus and the two perturbing bodies, Saturn and Jupiter, were greater than the equivalent distances for worlds closer to the Sun so that the perturbations might be measurably distorted through use of the inverse square law, too.

Astronomers were, however, reluctant to tamper with Newton's equation until all other alternatives had been ruled out. One reason for this was esthetic. The inverse law could be so simply represented in mathematical form that it was "elegant," and no scientist likes to disturb elegance until all else fails.

Another reason was practical. If the inverse square law were modified to account for Uranus's motion, it would be an *ad hoc* adjustment. The Latin phrase means "for this purpose" and is used for any argument that is brought in solely for the purpose of explaining some one thing that is otherwise puzzling, especially if the argument cannot be applied to any other phenomenon.

Even though the adjustment of the inverse square law fits Uranus, there is no other body in the Solar system it can fit since only Uranus is far enough away for the adjustment to be meaningful — and Uranus alone is unconvincing.

Of course, if there were another distant planet, its motion could be tested, too, and if its motions *also* fit the adjustment of the inverse square law, then the argument would become rather convincing.

But if another distant planet existed beside Uranus, it might be the source of a perturbing gravitational pull on Uranus, which would account for the discrepancy in Uranus's motion. You might not, in that case, need the adjustment of the inverse square law.

Some astronomers seized on that possibility. Another planet, meaning another gravitational pull, meaning another perturbation, meaning a corrected orbit that Uranus would follow, would be delightful. But where was the planet?

It couldn't be closer to the Sun than Uranus was, for if it were large enough to produce a perceptible perturbation on Uranus, it should also be large enough to be detected without trouble, and it hadn't been. Furthermore, it should also produce an unaccounted for perturbation of Saturn's orbit, and there was none.

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The unknown planet, if any, would have to be farther away than Uranus, displaying a smaller and dimmer disc and a slower motion than any other planet, and therefore having escaped detection till now. Further, from a point far enough beyond Uranus, it would be close enough to that planet to perturb it noticeably, but too far from Saturn to perturb that planet noticeably.

It is not enough to postulate a distant Planet Eight beyond Uranus. The planet must be detected. But if Uranus can barely be seen by the unaided eye, Planet Eight, dimmer still, would surely be visible only by telescope, and, with its tiny disc and slow motion, would be lost among the great numbers of equally dim stars. Detection would be difficult indeed.

But why not turn things about? If you know where a planet is and how it moves, you can calculate its perturbing effect on Uranus. Given the perturbing effect, can you not calculate where the planet is and how it moves and therefore know where to look for it?

Enter John Couch Adams who, in 1841, was twenty-two years old and who was studying at Cambridge University. He was first in his class in mathematics, and it occurred to him to try to calculate the position of Planet Eight.

If Planet Eight were on the other side of the Sun from Uranus as both pursued their slow passage along their vast orbits, the distance between the two planets would be too great for a detectable perturbation of Uranus to exist. Therefore, both must be on the same side of the Sun.

Since Uranus's position was a little in advance of its calculated position, Planet Eight must, during all or most of the years since Uranus's discovery, have been ahead of it, so that its gravitational pull had served to hurry Uranus along a little. Uranus, however, being closer to the Sun, would move faster than Planet Eight and would therefore overtake it. (The overtaking took place in 1822, actually.) Thereafter, Planet Eight would be behind Uranus and would tend to slow Uranus's motion slightly. All this had to be taken into account.

Adams made some simplifying assumptions to begin with. He assumed Planet Eight was about as massive as Uranus, moved in a perfectly circular orbit in the same plane as Uranus, and that it was twice as far from the Sun as Uranus was (just as Uranus was twice as far from the Sun as Saturn was).

All these assumptions were chosen to make the calculations easier, but they were reasonable ones. Using them, and the observed discrepancies of

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Uranus's position from year to year, Adams worked away in his spare time and, by September 1845, had calculated the position of Planet Eight for October 1 of that year. It was at a point within the constellation of Aquarius.

Naturally, the planet wouldn't be exactly at that point unless all of Adams's assumptions were exactly correct, and they clearly might not be. (One of them turned out to be badly off, for Planet Eight was not twice as far from the Sun as Uranus was, but was only 1.5 times as far.) Anyone would know, therefore, that it would not be enough to look at the exact predicted point, but that one would have to sweep the neighborhood of the point and carefully study thousands of stars.

Adams gave the result of his calculations to James Challis (the first villain of the piece) since Challis was the director of the Cambridge Observatory. Adams's hope was that Challis, with telescopes at his disposal, would search Aquarius for the planet. Challis thought otherwise. Knowing quite well that the search would be tedious and was more likely than not to end with nothing, he ducked. He gave Adams a letter of recommendation to the astronomer Royal, George Biddell Airy (the second villain) and thus successfully passed the buck.

Airy was a conceited, envious, small-minded person who ran the Greenwich Observatory like a petty tyrant. He was obsessed with detail and invariably missed the big picture. Thus, later in his life, he labored over expeditions intended to study the transits of Venus across the Sun in 1874 and in 1882. By determining the exact time at which Venus made apparent contact with the Solar disc as seen from different observation points, the distance of Venus and, therefore, all the other planets and the Sun, could be calculated (it was hoped) with unprecedented accuracy.

Airy spent years training his observers, building a model of the Venus-transit on which dry runs could be made, personally making sure that everything was packed and labelled in the most meticulous way, getting every last minor detail exactly right, as though his underlings were one and all five years old — and never considering what effect Venus's dense atmosphere might have. As it turned out, the atmosphere obscured the precise moment of contact of Venus and the Solar disc and made the entire expedition worthless.

About the only real success Airy had was personal. He was the first to design eyeglass lenses that corrected astigmatism. He was himself-astigmatic, you see — literally, as well as figuratively.

It was this nasty person Adams tried to contact. The telephone had not

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yet been invented, so Adams traveled twice to Greenwich and twice Airy wasn't home. A third time, Airy was at dinner and would not be disturbed (naturally). Adams left his paper and Airy finally leafed through it and wasn't impressed (naturally). Airy, with his usual flair for picking the wrong solution, was convinced that the inverse square law needed adjusting and would not accept a new planet. He therefore wasted time by writing to Adams and asking him to check some points that were completely irrelevant to the problem.

Adams knew they were irrelevant, sighed, and gave up. He didn't even answer the letter.

Meanwhile, in France, a young astronomer, Urbain Jean Joseph Leverrier, was also working on the problem. He made the same assumptions Adams did, and located Planet Eight in very nearly the same place in Aquarius that Adams did. He completed his work about half a year after Adams and, of course, had no knowledge of what Adams had done.

Leverrier, who had already established a reputation as an astronomer (as Adams had not) was encouraged by his superiors (as Adams was not) and published his calculations.

Airy read Leverrier's paper, then wrote to him asking him the same irrelevant question he had asked Adams — but without telling Leverrier that Adams had already done the work. Unlike Adams, Leverrier answered at once, pointing out that the question was irrelevant.

By now, Airy was reluctantly impressed. Two men had come up with the same solution, and the silliness of his own objection had been pointed out. He therefore wrote to Challis, asking him to inspect the sky in the indicated position and see if he could find a planet.

Challis was no more eager to take up the search now than he had been in the first place. He didn't think it would come to anything and he was far more interested in some trivial computations he was making of cometary orbits. So he didn't hurry. It was three weeks after he got Airy's request before he even started and then he proceeded very slowly indeed.

By September 18, he had been at it for six weeks, observing thousands of stars in a desultory sort of way, uninterested, unenthusiastic, and failing to check stars observed on one day with the same stars observed on another day in order to see whether any of them moved relative to the rest — which would be a sure sign it was a planet.

On September 18, meanwhile, Leverrier, receiving nothing from Cambridge and feeling, in any case, that the Berlin Observatory was the best in

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Europe, wrote to Berlin. The director of the Berlin Observatory was willing to check the matter and he asked the German astronomer, Johann Gottfried Galle, to take care of it.

Galle might have had to go through the same tedious checking that Challis was going through (though undoubtedly with greater industry and care) were it not for a lucky break. The Berlin Observatory had been preparing a careful series of star charts, and a 24-year-old astronomer at the observatory, Heinrich Louis D'Arrest, suggested to Galle that he ought to see if Aquarius had been charted.

It *had* been, and only half a year before. Galle got the chart and now the matter was simple. He didn't have to look for a visible disc. He didn't have to study anything from day to day just to see if it were moving against the background of the other stars. All he had to do was to see if there was any object in that section of the sky that was not in the same position on the chart.

On the night of September 23, 1846, then, Galle and D'Arrest got to work. Galle was at the telescope, moving methodically over the field, calling out the positions of stars, one by one, while D'Arrest was at the chart, checking those positions. They had been working for but one hour, no longer, when Galle called off the position of an eighth-magnitude star and D'Arrest said, in excitement, "That's not on the chart."

It was the planet! It was only 52 minutes (about one and a half times the apparent width of the full Moon) away from the predicted point. Naturally, Galle checked on it from night to night but after a week it was quite certain that it was moving and that it had a disc. Planet Eight had been discovered.

Once the news was announced, Challis hurriedly went over his own observations and found that he had seen Neptune on four different occasions, but had never compared positions and so had not known what he had.

Both Airy and Challis had made fools of themselves and they knew it. They had lost credit for a magnificent discovery that they might have made. Neither one, in their wriggling attempts at self-justification, thought to give proper credit to Adams.

The English astronomer, John Herschel, knew of Adams' work, however, and he took up the cudgels. He was the son of the discoverer of Uranus and an important astronomer in his own right, so his word carried weight. No sooner was the discovery of Neptune announced than Herschel wrote a letter to point out that Adams had done the work before Leverrier

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and had reached the same conclusions.

Naturally, the French were very indignant at what seemed to them to be an attempt by the British to steal the credit, and for quite a while there was a furious and bitter controversy over the matter in which Adams and Leverrier did *not* join. It had a happy end, though. Nowadays, the credit for the discovery of Planet Eight is shared by the two men, as it should be.

(It turned out, of course, that Galle had not been the first to sight the planet. Back on May 8, 1795, only fourteen years after the discovery of Uranus, the French astronomer, Joseph Jérôme de Lalande, noted a star whose position he recorded. Two days later, he observed it again and was mortified to note that he had made a mistake in the position. He recorded the new position and forgot the matter. Actually, he had made no mistake. The "star" had moved in those two days, because Lalande, without knowing it, was looking at Planet Eight.)

What was the new planet to be called? French astronomers, stung by the British claim to precedence, pushed hard to lock in French credit by giving the planet the name "Leverrier." They sweetened this suggestion by proposing that Uranus be deprived of its mythical name and be called "Herschel" (as had indeed been originally suggested by British astronomers). It was pointed out that comets were named after their discoverers, and that this should set a precedent.

Everyone but the French astronomers, however, set up a wild howl of

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protest and the proposal was dropped. It was back to mythology.

Planet Eight has a distinct greenish color when seen in the telescope, and Leverrier had this in mind, perhaps, when he suggested, quite early in the game, that the new sea-green planet be named after the Roman god of the green sea, Neptune (equivalent to the Greek god, Poseidon). That suggestion was adopted.

And what happened to poor John Couch Adams after all this? As far as I know, he never succumbed to bitterness. He worked away at astronomy and was able to show that the Leonid meteor swarm had an elongated comet-like orbit, thus strengthening the suggestion that much of the interplanetary debris in the inner Solar system consisted of the fragments of disintegrated comets.

In 1860, Challis retired as director of Cambridge University and Adams was given the post, in what seems to have been a quiet apology for the past. Then, in 1881, Airy, having been Astronomer Royal for forty-five years, retired, and that post, too, was offered to Adams. This Adams refused, feeling too old to take on the responsibility.

Airy and Adams were curiously united in death as well. Airy died on January 2, 1892, at the age of 90.4 years. Adams followed almost at once, on January 21, 1892, at the age of 72.6 years. Galle, however, survived his sighting of Neptune by over six decades, dying on July 10, 1910, at the age of 98.1 years.

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Quester was on the last voyage of the frozen comet cum spaceship Hell's Snowball *when he discovered that the engines and the lifeboats were missing. And that was only the beginning of the difficulties . . .*

The Funhouse Effect

by JOHN VARLEY

"Did you see what's playing at the theater tonight, Mr. Quester?" The stewardess was holding a printed program in her hand.

"No, and I haven't the time now. Where's the captain? There are some things he should —"

"Two old flat movies," she went on, oblivious to his protests. "Have you ever seen one? They're very interesting and entertaining. *A Night to Remember* and *The Poseidon Adventure.* I'll make a reservation for you."

Quester called out to her as she was leaving.

"I'm trying to tell you, there's something badly wrong on this ship. Won't anybody listen?"

But she was gone, vanished into the crowd of merrymakers. She was busy enough without taking time to listen to the wild tales of a nervous passenger.

Quester was not quite right in thinking of *Hell's Snowball* as a ship. The official welcoming pamphlet referred to it as an asterite, but that was advertising jargon. Anyone else would have called it a comet.

Icarus Lines, Inc., the owners, had found it drifting along at a distance of 500 AU. It had been sixty kilometers in diameter, weighing in at about one hundred trillion tons.

Fortunately, it was made up of frozen liquids rich in hydrogen. Moving it was only a matter of installing a very large fusion motor, then sitting back for five years until it was time to slow it down for orbit in the umbra of Mercury.

The company knew they would not get many passengers on a bare snowball. They tunneled into the comet, digging out staterooms and pantries and crew's quaters as they went. The shipfitters went in and paneled the bare ice walls in metal and plastic, then filled the rooms with furniture. There was room to

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spare, power to spare. They worked on a grand scale, and they had a grand vision. They intended to use the captive comet for sightseeing excursions to the sun.

Things went well for fifty years. The engine would shove the *Snowball* out of the protective shadow and, with the expenditure of ten million tons of ice and ammonia for reaction mass, inject it into a hyperbolic orbit that would actually brush the fringes of the solar corona. Business was good. *Hell's Snowball* became the vacation bonanza of the system, more popular than Saturn's Rings.

But it had to end. This was to be the last trip. Huge as it is, there comes a time when a comet has boiled off too much of its mass to remain stable in a close approach to the sun. *Hell's Snowball* was robbed of a hundred million tons with each trip. The engineers had calculated it was good for only one more pass before it cracked apart from internal heating.

But Quester was beginning to wonder.

There was the matter of the engines. Early on the fourth day of the excursion, Quester had gone on a guided tour of the farside of the comet to see the fusion engines. The guide had quoted statistics all the way through the tunnel, priming the tourists for the mind-wrenching sight of them. They were the largest rocket engines ever constructed. Quester and everyone else had been prepared to be impressed.

He *had* been impressed; first at the size of the pits that showed where the engines had been, then at the look of utter amazement on the face of the tour guide. Also impressive had been the speed with which the expression had been masked. The guide sputtered for only a moment, then quickly filled in with a story that almost sounded logical.

"I wish they'd tell me these things," he laughed. Did the laugh sound hollow? Quester couldn't tell for sure. "The engines weren't due for removal until tomorrow. It's part of our accelerated salvage program, you see, whereby we remove everything that can be of use in fitting-out the *Icarus*, which you all saw near Mercury when you boarded. It's been decided not to slow *Hell's Snowball* when we complete this pass, but to let it coast on out where it came from. Naturally, we need to strip it as fast as possible. So equipment not actually needed for this trip has been removed already. The rest of it will be taken off on the other side of the sun, along with the passengers. I'm not a physicist, but evidently there is a saving in fuel. No need to worry about it; our course is set and we'll have no further need of the engines." He quickly shepherded the buzzing group of passengers

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back into the tunnel.

Quester was no physicist, either, but he could work simple equations. He was unable to find a way whereby Icarus Lines would save anything by removing the engines. The fuel was free; by their own admission whatever was left on the comet was to be discarded anyway. So why did it matter if they burned some more? Further, ships removing passengers and furnishings from the *Snowball* on the other side would have to match with its considerably velocity, then expend even more to slow down to solar system speeds. It sounded wasteful.

He managed to put this out of his mind. He was along for the ride, to have fun, and he wasn't a worrier. He had probably dropped a decimal point somewhere in his calculations, or was forgetting a little-known fact of ballistics. Certainly no one else seemed worried.

When he discovered that the lifeboats were missing, he was more angry than frightened.

"Why are they doing to us?" he asked the steward who had come when he pressed the service bell. "Just because this is the last trip, does that mean we're not entitled to full protection? I'd like to know what's going on."

The steward, who was an affable man, scratched his head in bewilderment as he once more examined the empty lifeboat cradle.

"Beats me," he said, with a friendly grin. "Part of the salvage operation, I guess. But we've never had a spot of trouble in over fifty years. I hear the *Icarus* won't even carry lifeboats."

Quester fumed. If, sometime in the past, an engineer had decided *Hell's Snowball* needed lifeboats, he'd have felt a damn sight better if the ship still *had* lifeboats.

"I'd like to talk to someone who knows something about it."

"You might try the purser," the steward ventured, then quickly shook his head. "No, I forgot. The purser didn't make this trip. The first mate... no, she's... I guess that leaves the captain. You might talk to him."

Quester grumbled as he swam down the corridor toward the bridge. The company had no right to strip the ship before its final cruise. On the way there, he heard an announcement over the public address system.

"Attention. All passengers are to report to A Deck at 1300 hours for lifeboat drill. The purser... correction, the second officer will call the roll. Attendance is required of all passengers. That is all."

The announcement failed to mollify him, though he was puzzled.

The door to the bridge was ajar. There was a string spanning the open doorway with a hand-lettered

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sign hanging from it.

"The captain can be found at the temporary bridge," it read, "located on F Deck aft of the dispensary." Inside the room, a work crew was removing the last of the electronic equipment. There was the smell of ozone and oil, and the purple crackle of sparks. The room was little more than an ice-walled shell.

"What...?" Quester began.

"See the captain," the boss said tiredly, pulling out one of the last memory banks in a shower of shorting wires. "I just work here. Salvage crew."

Quester was reminded more of a wrecking crew. He started back toward F Deck.

"Correction on that last announcement," the PA said. "Lifeboat drill has been cancelled. The social director wishes to announce that he is no longer taking reservations for tours of the engine room. The second officer... correction, the third officer has requested all personnel to stay clear of the reactor room. There has been a slight spillage during the salvage program. Passengers are not to worry; this incident presents no danger to them. The power requirements of the ship are being taken over by the auxiliary reactor. The social director wishes to announce that tours of the auxiliary reactor are suspended. That is all."

"Is it just me?" Quester asked himself as he drifted by the groups of other passengers, none of whom seemed upset by any of this.

He located the temporary bridge, at the end of a little-used corridor that was stacked high with plastic crates marked "Immediate Removal — Rush, rgent, Highest Priority." He insinuated his way past them with difficulty and was about to knock on the door when he was stopped by the sound of voices on the other side. The voices were angry.

"I tell you, we should abort this trip at once. I've lost the capability to maneuver the ship in the event of an emergency. I told you I wanted the attitude thrusters to remain in place until after perihelenion."

"Captain, there is no use protesting now," said another voice. "Maybe I agree with you; maybe I don't. In any case, the engines are gone now, and there's no chance of installing them again. There is to be no argument with these orders. The company's in bad shape, what with outfitting the new asterite. Can you picture what it would cost to abort this trip and refund the fares to seven thousand passengers?"

"Hang the company!" the captain exploded. "This ship is *unsafe!* What about those new calculations I gave you — the ones from Lewiston? Have you looked them over?"

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The other voice was conciliatory. "Captain, Captain, you're wasting energy worrying about that crackpot. He's been laughed out of the Lunar Academy; his equations simply do not work."

"They look sound enough to me."

"Take it from me, Captain, the best minds in the system have assured us that the *Snowball* will hold together. Why, this old hunk of junk is good for a dozen more trips, and you know it. We've erred, if at all, on the conservative side."

"Well, maybe," the captain grumbled. "I still don't like that lifeboat situation, though. How many did you say we had left?"

"Twenty-eight," the other soothed.

Quester felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

He peeked into the room, not knowing what he would say. But there was no one there. The voices were coming from a speaker on the wall. Evidently the captain was in another part of the ship.

He considered going to his cabin and getting drunk, then decided it was a bad idea. He would go to the casino and get drunk.

On the way he passed a lifeboat cradle that was not empty. It was the site of bustling activity, with crews hurrying up and down ramps into the ship. He stuck his head in, saw that the seats had been stripped and the interior was piled high with plastic crates. More were being added every minute.

He stopped one of the workers and asked her what was going on.

"Ask the captain," she shrugged. "They told me to stack these boxes in here, that's all I know."

He stood back and watched until the loading was complete, then was told to stand clear as the nullfield was turned off to allow the boat to drift clear of the *Snowball.* At a distance of two kilometers, the engines fired and the boat was away, blasting back toward the inner planets.

"Twenty-seven," Quester mumbled to himself and headed for the casino.

"Twenty-seven?" the woman asked.

"Probably less by now," Quester said with a broad shrug. "And they only hold fifty people."

They were sitting together at the roulette table, pressed into close company by the random currents of humanity that ebbed and flowed through the room. Quester was not gambling; his legs had just happened to give out, and the nearest place to collapse had been the chair he was sitting in. The woman had materialized out of his alcoholic mist.

It was nice to get back to gravity after the weightless levels of the

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Snowball. But, he discovered, getting drunk in a weightless state was less hazardous. One needn't worry about one's balance. Here in the casino there was the problem of standing. It was too much of a problem for Quester.

The casino was located at one end of a slowly rotating arm, which was mounted horizontally on a pivoted mast that extended straight up from *Hell's Snowball.* On the other end of the arm were the restaurants that served the passengers. Both modules were spherical; the structure resembled an anemometer with silver balls instead of cups on the ends. The view was tremendous. Overhead was the silver sphere that contained the restaurants. To one side was the slowly moving surface of the comet, a dirty gray even in the searing sunlight. To the other side were the stars and the main attraction: Sol itself, blemished with a choice collection of spots. The viewing was going to be good this trip. If anyone was alive to view it, Quester added to himself.

"Twenty-seven, you say?" the woman asked again.

"That's right, twenty-seven."

"One hundred Marks on number twenty-seven," she said and placed her bet. Quester looked up, wondering how many times he would have to repeat himself before she understood him.

The ball clattered to a stop, on number twenty-seven, and the croupier shoveled a tottering stack of chips to the woman. Quester looked around him again at the huge edifice he was sitting in, the incalculable tonnage of the spinning structure, and laughed.

"I wondered why they built this place," he said. "Who needs gravity?"

"Why did they build it?" she asked him, picking up the chips.

"For him," he said, pointing to the croupier. "That little ball would just hang there on the rim without gravity." He felt himself being lifted to his feet, and stood in precarious balance. He threw his arms wide.

"For that matter, that's what all the gravity in the system's for. To bring those little balls down to the number, the old wheel of fortune; and when they've got your number, there's nothing you can do because your number's up, that's all there is, twenty-seven, that's all...."

He was sobbing and mumbling philosophical truths as she led him from the room.

The ride in the elevator to the hub of the rotating structure sobered Quester considerably. The gradually decreasing weight combined with the Coriolis effect that tended to push him against one wall was more than an abused

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stomach could take. The management knew that and had provided facilities for it. Quester vomited until his legs were shaky. Luckily, by then he was weightless and didn't need them.

The woman towed him down the passageway like a toy balloon. They ended up in the grand ballroom.

The ballroom was a hemisphere of nullfield sitting on the surface of the *Snowball.* From inside it was invisible. The dance area was crowded with couples trying out free-fall dances. Most of them had the easy grace of a somersaulting giraffe.

Quester sobered a bit in the near-zero gee. Part of it was the effect of the antinausea drugs he had taken for free-fall; they also tended to reduce the effects of alcohol.

"What's your name?" he asked the woman.

"Solace. You?"

"I'm Quester. From Tharsis, Mars. I'm... I'm confused about a lot of things."

She floated over to a table, still towing Quester, and fastened him to one of the chairs. He turned his attention from the twisting bodies in the dance area to his companion.

Solace was tall, much taller than a man or a woman would naturally grow. He estimated she was two and a half meters from head to toe, though she had no toes. Her feet had been replaced with peds, oversized hands popular with spacers. They were useful in free-fall, and for other things, as he discovered when she reached across the table with one slender leg and cupped his cheek with her ped. Her legs were as limber and flexible as her arms.

"Thanks," she said, with a smile. "For the luck, I mean."

"Hmmm? Oh, you mean the bet." Quester had to drag his attention back from the delightful sensation on his cheek. She was beautiful. "But I wasn't advising you on a bet. I was trying to tell you...."

"I know. You were saying something about the lifeboats."

"Yes. It's astounding, I...." He stopped, realizing that he couldn't remember what was astounding. He was having trouble focusing on her. She was wearing a kaleidoholo suit, which meant she was naked but for a constantly shifting pattern of projections. There seemed to be fifty or sixty different suits contained in it, none persisting for longer than a few seconds. It would melt smoothly from a silver sheath dress to an almost military uniform with gold braid and buttons to a garland of flowers to Lady Godiva. He rubbed his eyes and went on.

"They're salvaging the ship," he said. "The last I heard there were only twenty-seven lifeboats

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left. And more are leaving every hour. They're taking the electronic equipment with them. And the furnishings and the machinery and who knows what else. I overheard the captain talking to a company representative. *He's* worried, the *captain!* But no one else seems to be. Am I worrying over nothing, or what?"

Solace looked down at her folded hands for a moment, then brought her eyes back up to his.

"I've been uneasy, too," she said in a low voice. She leaned closer to him. "I've shared my apprehensions with a group of friends. We... get together and share what we have learned. Our friends laugh at us when we tell them of our suspicions, but...." She paused and looked suspiciously around her. Even in his befuddled state Quester had to smile.

"Go on," he said.

She seemed to make up her mind about him and leaned even closer.

"We'll be meeting again soon. Several of us have been scouting around — I was covering the casino when we met — and we'll share our findings and try to come to a consensus on what to do. Are you with us?"

Quester fought off the feeling, quite strong since his suspicions began to haunt him, that he was somehow trapped in an adventure movie. But if he was, he was just getting to the good part.

"You can count me in."

With no further ado, she grabbed his arm in one of her peds and began towing him along, using her hands to grab onto whatever was handy. He thought of objecting, but she was much better than he at weightless maneuvering.

"May I have your attention, please?"

Quester looked around and spotted the captain standing in the center of the stage, in front of the band. He was not alone. On each side of him were women dressed in black jumpsuits, their eyes alertly scanning the audience. They were armed.

"Please, please," the captain held up his arms for quiet and eventually got it. He wiped his brow with a handerchief.

"There is no cause for alarm. No matter what you may have been hearing, the ship is in no danger. The stories about the main engines having been removed are lies, pure and simple. We are looking for the people who planted these rumors and will soon have all of them in custody. The chief engineer wishes to announce that tours of the engine room will be resumed —"

One of the women shot the captain a glance. He mopped his brow again and consulted a slip of paper in his hand. The hand was shaking.

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"Ah, a correction. The engineer announces that tours will *not* be resumed. There is, ah... that is, they are being overhauled, or... or something." The woman relaxed slightly.

"The rumor that the main reactor has been shut down is unfounded. The surgeon has told me that there has been no spillage of radioactive material, and even if there had been, the amount was insignificent and would only have been a danger to those passengers with high cumulative exposures. The surgeon will be collecting dosimeters at 1400 hours tomorrow.

"Let me repeat: there is no cause for alarm. As captain of this ship, I take a very dim view of rumormongering. Anyone caught disseminating stories about the unspaceworthiness of this vessel in the future will be dealt with sternly."

"Lifeboat drill will be held tomorrow on A Deck, as scheduled. Anyone who has not as yet been checked out on his life jacket will do so by noon tomorrow, ship's time. That is... is that all?" This last was addressed to the woman to his left, in a whisper. She nodded curtly, and the three of them walked off the stage, their magnetized shoes sticking to the deck like flypaper.

Solace nudged Quester in the ribs.

"Are those women bodyguards?" she whispered. "Do you think his life is in danger?"

Quester looked at the way the women gripped the captain's elbows. Not bodyguards, but guards, certainly...

"Say, I just remembered I still have some unpacking to do," he said. "Maybe I can join you and your friends later on. I'll just nose around, see what I can pick up, you know, and —"

But he couldn't squirm free of her grip. Those peds were *strong*.

"May I have your attention, please? Lifeboat drill for tomorrow has been canceled. Repeat, canceled. Passengers showing up at the cradles for lifeboat drill will be interrogated, by order of the captain. That is all."

On the way to Solace's room, the two were shoved out of the way by a group of people in uniform. Their faces were determined, and some of them carried clubs.

"Where does that corridor lead?" he asked.

"To the bridge. But they won't find anything there, it's been —"

"I know."

"I think we're being followed."

"Wha'?" He looked behind him as he bounced along in her wake. There was someone back there, all right. They turned a corner and Solace hauled Quester into a dimly lit alcove, bumping his head roughly against the wall. He was

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getting fed up with this business of being dragged. If this was an adventure, he was Winnie-the-Pooh following Christopher Robin up the stairs. He started to object, but she clapped a hand around his mouth, holding him close.

"Shhh," she hissed.

A fine thing, Quester grumbled to himself. Can't even speak my mind. He thought he was better off before, alone and puzzled, than he was with this mysterious giantess towing him around.

Of course, things could have been worse, he reflected. She was warm and naked to the touch no matter what his eyes told him. And *tall.* Floating there in the hall, she extended above and below him by a third of a meter.

"How can I think of something like that at a time like this?" he began, but she hushed him again and her arms tightened around him. He realized she was really scared, and he began to be so himself. The liquor and the sheer unlikelihood of recent events had detached him; he was drifting along, rudderless. Nothing in his life had prepared him to cope with things like the black-suited man who now eased slowly around the corner in shadowy pursuit of them.

They watched him from the concealment of the alcove. Many of the lights in the corridor were not working or were mere empty sockets. Earlier, Quester had been alarmed at this, adding it to his list of ways not to run a spaceship. Now, he was grateful.

"He doesn't look much like a man at all," Solace whispered. And sure enough, he didn't. Nor a woman. He didn't look too human.

"Humanoid, I'd say," Quester whispered back. "Pity no one told us. Obviously the system's been invaded by the first intelligent race of humanoids."

"Don't talk nonsense. And be quiet." The man, or whatever it was, was very close now. They could see the ill-fitting pink mask, the lumps and nodules in odd places under his sweater and pants. He passed them by, leaving a pungent odor of hydrogen sulfide.

Quester found himself laughing. To his surprise, Solace laughed along with him. The situation was so grotesque that he had to either laugh or scream.

"Listen," he said, "I don't *believe* in sinister humanoid invaders."

"No? But you believe in superhuman heavy-planet Invaders like the ones that have occupied the Earth, don't you? And you haven't even *seen* them."

"Are you telling me you do believe that thing was an... an alien?"

"I'm not saying anything. But I'm wondering what those people were doing, earlier, armed with

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clubs. Do you believe in mutiny?"

"Solace, I'd *welcome* a mutiny, I'd throw a party, give away all my worldly wealth to charity if only such a normal, everyday thing would happen. But I don't think it will. I think we've fallen through the looking glass."

"You think you're crazy?" She looked at him skeptically.

"Yep. I'm going to turn myself in right now. You're obviously not even here. Maybe this ship isn't even here."

She twisted slightly in the air, bringing her legs up close to his chest.

"I'll prove to you I'm here," she said, working with all four hands and peds at unbuttoning him.

"Hold it. What are you... how can you think of that at a time like...." It sounded familiar. She laughed, holding his wrists with her hands as her peds quickly stripped him.

"You've never been in danger before," she said. "I have. It's a common reaction to get aroused in a tight spot, especially when the danger's not immediate. And you are, and so am I."

It was true. He was, but didn't like doing it in the hallway.

"There's not room here," he protested. "Another of those critters could come along."

"Yes, isn't it exciting?" Her eyes were alight by now, and her breath was fast and shallow. "And if you think there isn't room, you haven't done it in free-fall yet. Ever tried the Hermesian Hyperbola?"

Quester sighed, and submitted. Soon he was doing more than submitting. He decided she was as crazy as everyone else, or, alternatively, he was crazy and she was as sane as everybody else. But she was right about the free-fall. There was plenty of room.

They were interrupted by a crackle of static from the public address. They paused to listen to it.

"Attention, your attention please. This is the provisional captain speaking. The traitor running-dog lackey ex-captain is now in chains. Long Live the Revolutionary Committee, who will now lead us on the true path of Procreative Anti-Abortionism."

"Free-Birthers!" Quester yelped. "We've been hijacked by Free-Birthers!"

The new captain, who sounded like a woman, started to go on, but her voice was cut short in a hideous gurgle.

"Long Live the Loyalist Faction of the Glorious Siblings of the —" a new voice began, but it, too, was cut short. Voices shouted in rapid succession.

"The counterrevolution has been suppressed," shouted yet another captain. "Liberate our

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wombs! Our gonads — Our Freedom! Attention, attention! All female persons aboard this ship are ordered to report at once to the infirmary for artificial insemination. Shirkers will be obliterated. That is all."

Neither of them said anything for a long time. At last Solace eased herself away a bit and let him slip out of her. She let out a deep breath.

"I wonder if I could plead double jeopardy?"

"Insanity four, reality nothing," Quester giggled. He was in high spirits as they skulked their way down the dim corridors.

"Are you still on that?" Solace shot back. She sounded a bit tired of him. She kept having to hang back as he struggled to keep up with her supple quadridexterous pace. "Listen, if you want to get fitted for a strait-jacket, the tailor's in the other direction. Me, I don't care how ridiculous the situation gets. I'll keep coping."

"I can't help it," he admitted. "I keep feeling that I *wrote* this story several years ago. Maybe in another life. I dunno."

She peered around another corner. They were on their way to the temporary bridge. They had stopped three times already to watch black-suited figures drift by. Everyone else they had seen — those dressed in holiday clothes — had ducked into doorways as quickly as they themselves. At least it seemed that the passengers were no longer in the holiday mood, were aware that there was something wrong.

"You a writer?" she asked.

"Yes. I write scientifiction. Maybe you've heard of it. There's a cult following, but we don't reach the general public."

"What's it about?"

"Scientifiction deals with life on Earth. It's set in the future — each of us creates our own hypothetical future with our own ground rules and set of assumptions. The basic assumption is that we figure out a way to fight the Invaders and reclaim the Earth, or at least a beachhead. In my stories we've managed to rout the Invaders, but the dolphins and whales are still around, and they want their allies back, so humans fight them. It's adventure stuff, purely for thrills. I have a hero called the Panama Kid."

She glanced back at him, and he couldn't read the expression. He was used to taking the defensive about his vocation.

"Is there a living in that?"

"I managed to get aboard the *Snowball* for the final trip, didn't I? That wasn't cheap, but then you know that. Say, what do you do for a living?"

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"Nothing. My mother was a holehunter. She made a strike in '45 and got rich. She went out again and left the money to me. She's due back in about fifty years, unless she gets swallowed by a hole."

"So you were born on Pluto?"

"No. I was born in free-fall, about one hundred AU from the sun. I think that's a record so far." She grinned back at him, looking pleased with herself. "You made up your mind yet?"

"Huh?"

"Have you decided if you're the author or a character? If you really think you're crazy, you can shove off. What can you do but accept the reality of your senses?"

He paused and really thought about it for the first time since he met her.

"I do," he said, firmly. "It's all happening. Holy Cetacean, *it really is happening.*"

"Glad to have you with us. I *told* you you couldn't experience the Hermesian Hyperbola and still doubt your senses."

It hadn't been the love-making, Quester knew. That could be as illusory as anything else; he had the stained sheets to prove it. But he believed in *her,* even if there was something decidedly illogical about the goings-on around her.

"Attention, attention."

"Oh, shit. What now?" They slowed near a speaker so they could listen without distortion.

"Glad tidings! This is the provisional captain, speaking for the ad hoc steering committee. We have decided to steer this comet into a new, closer approach to the sun, thus gaining speed for a faster departure from solar space. It has been decided to convert this vessel, hereafter to be referred to as the *Spermatozoa,* into an interstellar colony ship to spread the seed of humanity to the stars. All passengers are hereby inducted into the Proletarian Echelon of the Church of Unlimited Population. Conversion of all resources into a closed-ecology system will begin at once. Save your feces! Breathe shallowly until this crisis is past. Correction, correction, there is no crisis. Do not panic. Anyone found panicking will be shot. The steering committee has determined that there is no crisis. All surviving officers with knowledge of how to work these little gadgets on the bridge are ordered to report immediately."

Quester looked narrowly at Solace.

"Do you know anything about them?"

"I can pilot a ship, if that's what you mean. I've never flown anything quite this... *enormous*... but the principles are the same. You aren't suggesting that we help them, are you?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I

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didn't really think in terms of plans until a few minutes ago. What was *your* plan? Why are we headed for the bridge?"

She shrugged. "Just to see what the hell's going on, I guess. But maybe we ought to make some preparations. Let's get some life jackets."

They found a locker in the hall containing emergency equipment. Inside were twenty of the nullfield devices called life jackets. More accurately, they were emergency spacesuit generators, with attached water recyclers and oxygen supply. Each of them was a red cylinder about thirty centimeters long and fifteen in diameter with shoulder straps and a single flexible tube with a metal connector on the end. They were worn strapped to the back with the tube reaching over the shoulder.

In operation, the life jackets generated a nullfield that conformed closely to the contours of the wearer's body. The field oscillated between one and one and a half millimeters from the skin, and the resulting bellows action forced waste air through the exhaust nozzle. The device attached itself to a tiny metal valve that was surgically implanted in all the passengers. The valve's external connection was located under Quester's left collarbone. He had almost forgotten it was there. It was just a brass-colored flower that might be mistaken for jewelry but was actually part of a plumbing system that could route venous blood from his pulmonary artery to the oxygenator on his back. It then returned through a parallel pipe to his left auricle and on to his body.

Solace helped him get into it and showed him the few manual controls. Most of it was automatic. It would switch on the field around him if the temperature or pressure changed suddenly.

Then they were off again through the silent corridors to confront the hijackers.

At the last turn in the corridor before reaching the temporary bridge, they stopped to manually switch on their suit fields. Solace instantly became a mirror in the shape of a woman. The field reflected all electromagnetic radiation except through pupil-sized discontinuities over her eyes which let in controlled quanta of visible light. It was disquieting. The funhouse effect, it was called, and it looked as if her body had been twisted through another spatial dimension. She almost disappeared, except for a pattern of distortions that hurt Quester's eyes when he looked at it.

They reached the door leading to the bridge and stopped for a moment. It was a perfectly ordinary door. Quester wondered why he was

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here with this impulsive woman.

"Do we knock first, or what?" she mused. "What do you think, Quester? What would the Panama Kid do?"

"He'd knock it down," Quester said without hesitation. "But he wouldn't have gotten here without his trusty laser. Say, do you think we ought to go back and...."

"No. We'd better do it now before we think about it too hard. These suits are protection against any weapon I know of. The most they can do is capture us."

"Then what?"

"Then you can talk us out of it. You're the one who's fast with words, aren't you?"

Quester remained silent as she backed up and planted herself against the opposite wall, coiled and ready to hit the door with her shoulder. He didn't want to point out that skill with a typer and skill at oratory are not necessarily related. Besides, if she wanted to risk forcible insemination, it was her business.

Just on the off chance, he touched the door plate with his palm. It clicked, and the door opened. It was too late. Solace howled and barreled end-over-end into the room, reaching out with all four limbs like a huge silver starfish to grab onto something. Quester rushed after her, then stopped short as soon as he was into the room. There was no one in it.

"Talk about your anticlimax," Solace breathed, getting herself sorted out from a pile of crates at the far end of the room. "I... never mind. It was my fault. Who'd have thought it'd be unlocked?"

"*I* did," Quester pointed out. "Hold it a minute. We're sort of, well, we're being pretty hasty, aren't we? I haven't really had time to stop and think since we got going, but I think we're going at this the wrong way, I really do. Damn it, this isn't an adventure, where everything goes according to a set pattern. I've written enough of them, I ought to know. This is life, and that means there's got to be a rational explanation."

"So what is it?"

"I don't know. But I don't think we'll find it this way. Things have been happening... well, think about the announcements over the PA, for instance. They are *crazy!* No one's that crazy, not even Free-Birthers."

Quester's chain of thought was interrupted by the noisy entrance of four people in life jackets. He and Solace jumped up, banged their heads on the ceiling, and were quickly captured.

"All right, which one of you is the provisional captain?"

There was a short silence, then Solace broke it with a laugh.

"Lincoln?" she asked.

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"Solace?"

The four were part of Solace's short-lived cabal. It seemed the ship was crawling with people who were concerned enough about the situation to try and do something about it. Before Quester caught all the names, they were surprised by another group of four, with three more close on their heels. The situation threatened to degenerate into a pitched battle of confused identities until someone had a suggestion.

"Why don't we hang a sign on the door? Anybody who comes in here thinks we're the hijackers." They did, and the sign said the provisional captain was dead. While new arrivals were pondering that and wondering what to do next, someone had time to explain the situation.

Someone arrived with a tray of drinks, and soon the would-be liberators were releasing their tensions in liquor and argument. There were fifteen pet theories expounded in as many minutes.

Now that he felt he had his feet under him, Quester adopted a wait-and-see attitude. That data was still insufficient.

"'When you have eliminated the impossible,'" he quoted, "'whatever is left, however improbable, must be the truth.'"

"So what does that gain us?" Solace asked.

"Only a viewpoint. Me. I think we'll have to wait until we get back to Mercury to find out what's been happening. Unless you bring me a live alien, or Free-Birther, or... some physical evidence."

"Then let's go look for it," Solace said.

"Attention, attention. This is the ship's computer speaking. I have grave news for all passengers. The entire crew has been assassinated. Until now, I have been blocked by a rogue program inserted by the revolutionaries which has prevented me from regaining control of operations. Luckily, this situation has been remedied. Unluckily, the bridge is still in the hands of the pirates! They have access to all my manual controls from their position, and I'm afraid there is but one course open to those of you who wish to avoid a catastrophe. We are on a trajectory that will soon intersect with the solar chromosphere, and I am powerless to correct it until the bridge is regained. Rally to me! Rise in righteous fury and repulse the evil usurpers! Storm the bridge! Long live the counterrevolution!"

There was a short silence as the implications sank in, then a babble of near panic. Several people headed for the door, only to come back and bolt it. There was an ominous roar from outside.

"...chromosphere? Where the

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hell *are* we? Has anyone been out on the surface lately?"

"...some pleasure cruise. I haven't even *seen* the sun and now they say we're about to..."

"...pirates, revolutions, counter-revolutions, Free-Birthers, *aliens* for heaven's sake..."

Solace looked helplessly around her, listened to the pounding on the door. She located Quester hunkered down beside an instrument console and crouched beside him.

"Talk your way out of *this* one, Panama Kid," she yelled in his ear.

"My dear, I'm much too busy to talk. If I can get the back off this thing...." He worked at it and finally pulled off a metal cover. "There was a click from here when the computer came on the line."

There was a recorder inside, with a long reel of tape strung between playback heads. He punched a button that said rewind, watched the tape cycle briefly through, and hit the play button.

"Attention, attention. This is the ship's computer speaking. I have grave news for all passengers."

"We've *heard* that one already," someone shouted. Quester held his head in his hands for a moment, then looked up at Solace. She opened her mouth to say something, then bit her lip. her eyebrows almost touched in a look of puzzlement so funny that Quester would have laughed out loud. But the roof of the bridge evaporated.

It took only a few seconds. There was a blinding white light and a terrible roaring sound; then he was whisked into the air and pulled toward the outside. In an instant, everyone was covered in a nullfield and milling around the hole in the roof like a school of silverfish. In two's and three's they were sucked through. Then the room was empty and Quester was still in it. He looked down and saw Solace's hand around his ankle. She was grasping the firmly anchored computer console with one ped. She hauled him down to her and held him close as he found handholds. His teeth were chattering.

The door burst open, and there was another flurry of astonished passengers sucked through the roof. It didn't take as long this time; the hole in the roof was much larger. Beyond the hole was blackness.

Quester was surprised to see how calm he was once his initial shock had dissipated. He thanked Solace for saving him, then went on with what he had been about to say before the blowout.

"Did you talk to anyone who actually saw a mutineer, or a Free-Birther, or whatever?"

"Huh? Is this the time to... No, I guess I didn't. But we saw those aliens, or whatever they —"

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"Exactly. Whatever they were. They could have been anything. Someone is playing an awfully complicated trick on us. Something's happening, but it isn't what we've been led to believe."

"We've been led to believe something?"

"We've been given clues. Sometimes contradictory, sometimes absolutely insane, and encouraged to think a mutiny is going on; and this recorder proves it isn't happening. Listen." And he played back the recordings of various announcements they had heard earlier. It sounded tinny in their middle-ear receivers.

"But what does that prove?" Solace wanted to know. "Maybe this thing just taped them as they happened."

Quester was dumfounded for a moment. The theory of a vast conspiracy had appealed to him, even if he didn't know the reason for it.

He played past the point of the computer's announcement and sighed with relief when he heard that there was more. They let it natter on to no one about crises in the engine room, spillage in the second auxiliary reactor, and so on. It was obvious that it was playing a scenario that could no longer happen. Because the ship had already broken down completely and they were headed directly for...

They seemed to reach that thought simultaneously and scrambled up toward a hole in the ceiling to see what was going on. Quester forgot, as usual, to hang onto something and would have drifted straight up at near-escape velocity but for Solace's grasping hands.

The sun had eaten up the sky. It was huge, *huge.*

"That's what we paid to see," Solace said, weakly.

"Yeah. But I thought we'd see it from the ballroom. It's sort of... *big,* isn't it?"

"Do you think we're...?"

"I don't know. I never thought we'd get this close. Something the captain said — no, wait, it wasn't the captain, was it? But one of the recordings said something about..."

The ground heaved under them.

Quester saw the revolving casino complex off to his right. It swayed, danced, and came apart. The twin balls broke open, still rotating, and spilled tables and roulette wheels and playing cards and dishes and walls and carpets to the waiting stars. The debris formed a glittering double spiral of ejecta, like droplets of water spraying from the tips of a lawn sprinkler. Bits of it twisted in the sunlight, cartwheeling, caroming, semaphoring, kicking.

"Those are people."

"Are they...?" Quester couldn't ask it.

"No," Solace answered. "Those suits will protect them. Maybe they

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can be picked up later. You see, when you hit something wearing one of these suits, you —"

She didn't have time to finish, but Quester soon had a demonstration of what she was talking about. The ground opened a few meters from them. They were swept off their feet and tumbled helplessly across the dirty white surface until they hung suspended over the pit.

Quester hit the far side of the rift and bounced. He felt little of the impact, though he hit quite hard, because the suit field automatically stiffened when struck by a fast-moving object. He had cause to be thankful for that fact, because the rift began to close. He clawed his way along the surface toward the sunlight, but the walls of ice closed on him like a book snapped shut.

For a brief moment he was frozen while the ice and rock around him shook and vaporized under the incredible pressures of shearing force. He saw nothing but white heat as frozen methane and water became gas in an instant without an intermediate liquid stage. Then he was shot free as the masses came apart again.

He was still frozen into a climbing position, but now he could see. He was surrounded by chunks of debris, ranging from fist-sized rocks glowing bright red to giant icebergs that sublimated and disappeared before his eyes. Each time the suit began to lose its rigidity he was hit by another object and frozen into a new position as the suit soaked up the kinetic energy.

In a surprisingly short time, everything had vanished. Every particle of the explosion was impelled away from every other particle by the pressures of expanding superheated steam.

But Solace was still clinging to his ankle. She was the only thing left in his universe apart from a few tiny flashing stars of debris far in the distance, tumbling, tumbling.

And the sun.

He could look directly at it as it swung past his field of vision once every ten seconds. It could barely be seen as a sphere; each second it looked more like a flat, boiling plane. The majestic, crushing presence of it flattened his ego with a weight he could barely tolerate. He found Solace in his arms. He looked at her face, which was endless mirrors showing a vanishing series of suns rebounding from his face to hers and back to infinity. The funhouse effect, so disconcerting only an hour ago, seemed familiar and reassuring now in comparison to the chaos below him. He hugged her and closed his eyes.

"Are we going to hit it?" he asked.

"I can't tell. If we do, it'll be the hardest test these suits have ever

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had. I don't know if they have limits."

He was astounded. "You mean we might actually...?"

"I tell you, I don't know. Theoretically, yes, we could graze the chromosphere and not feel a thing, not from the heat, anyway. But it would be bound to slow us down pretty quickly. The deceleration could kill us. The suits protect us from outside forces almost completely, but internal accelerations can break bones and rupture organs. This suit doesn't stop gravity or inertia from working."

There was no use thinking too long on that possibility.

They were hurtling through the corona now, building up a wake of ionized particles that trailed after them like the tail of a tiny comet. They looked around them for other survivors but could find nothing. Soon, they could see little but a flickering haze as the electrical potential they had built up began discharging in furry feathers of hot plasma. It couldn't have lasted longer than a few minutes; then it began to fade slowly away.

There came a time when the sun could be seen to have shrunk slightly. They didn't speak of it, just held onto each other.

"What are our chances of pick-up?" Quester wanted to know. The sun was now much smaller, receding almost visibly behind them. They were concerned only for the next twenty hours, which was the length of their oxygen reserves.

"How should I know? Someone must know by now that something's happened, but I don't know if any ships can get to us in time. It would depend on where they were at the time of the disaster."

Quester scanned the stars as they swept past his field of vision. They had no way to slow their rotation; so the stars still went around them every ten seconds.

He didn't expect to see anything but was not surprised when he did. It was the next-to-last in a long series of incongruities. There was a ship closing in one them. A voice over the radio told them to stand by to come aboard and asked them how they enjoyed the trip.

Quester was winding up for a reply, but the speaker said one word, slowly and clearly:

"Frightfullness."

And everything changed.

I woke up and found out it had all been a dream.

The very first story I wrote, back when I was five years old, ended with words very much like that last sentence. I'm not ashamed of it. The thought was not new, but it was original with me. It was only later that I learned it's not a fair

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way to end a story, that the reader deserves more than that.

So here's more.

I woke up and found out it had *almost* all been a dream. The word, "frightfullness," was a posthypnotic trigger that caused me to remember all the things which had been blocked from me by earlier suggestion.

I don't know why I'm bothering to explain all this. I guess old writing habits die hard. No matter that this is being written for a board of psychists, mediartists, and flacks; I have to preserve the narrative thread. I've broken the rules by changing to first person at the end, but I found I could not write the account Icarus Lines requested of me unless I did it in the third person.

"I" am Quester, though that's not my real name. I am a scientifiction writer, but I have no character named the Panama Kid. Solace's name is something else. It was suggested that I change the names.

I signed aboard *Hell's Snowball* knowing that it was going to break apart along the way. That's why so much of it had been stripped. They retained only enough to preserve a tenuous illusion that the trip was a normal one, then threw in everything they could think of to scare the daylights out of us.

We knew they would. We agreed to and submitted to a hypnotic treatment that would fool us into thinking we were on a normal trip and were released into the crazy world they cooked up for us. It's the first time they had ever tried it, and so they threw in everything in the book: aliens, accidents, mutiny, confusion, crackpots, and I didn't even see it all. The experience is different for each passenger, but the basic theme is to put us into a scary situation with evident peril of life and limb, shake well, and then let us come through the experience safe and sound.

There was no danger, not from the first to the last. We were on a stable, carefully calculated orbit. The life jackets were enough to keep us absolutely safe against anything we would encounter, and we were conditioned to have them on at the right time. As proof of this, not a single passenger was injured.

We were *all* nearly scared to death.

It says here you want to know the motive. I remember it clearly now, though I remembered an entirely different one at the time. I went on the Disaster Express because I had just sold a novel and wanted to do something wild, out of character. That was the wildest thing I could think of, and I could wish I had gone to a museum instead. Because the next question you want me to answer is how I feel

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about it now that it's over, and you won't like it. I hope I'm in the majority and you people at Icarus will give this thing up and never run another like it.

There used to be something called a "haunted house." One was led blindfolded through it and encountered various horrors, the effect being heightened by the unknown nature of the things one touched and was touched by. People have done things like that for as long as we have history. We go to movies to be scared, ride on roller coasters, read books, go to funhouses. Thrills are never cheap, no matter what they say. It takes skill to produce them, and art, and a knowledge of what will be genuinely thrilling and what will be only amusing.

You people had mixed success. Part of it was the kitchen-sink approach you took on this first trip. If you unified your theme the next time, stuck to a mutiny or an invasion, for instance, instead of mucking it up with all the other insantiy you put in... but what am I saying? I don't want you to improve it. It's true that I was a little bemused by the unreality of the opener, but it was stark terror all the way when we approached the sun. My stomach still tightens just to think about it.

But — and I must cry it from the rooftops — you have gone too far. I'm basically conservative, as are all scientifiction writers, being concerned as we are with the past on Earth rather than the future in the stars. But I can't avoid thinking how frivolous it all was. Have we come to this? While our precious home planet remains under the three-hundred-year Occupation, do we devote ourselves to more and more elaborate ways of finding thrills?

I hope not.

There is a second consideration, one that I find it difficult to put into words. You hear of the "shipboard romance," when passengers become involved with each other only to part forever at their destination. Something of the sort happened to me and to Solace. We grew close on that loop through the corona. I didn't write about it. It's still painful. We clung to each other for two days. We made love with the stars at our feet.

We might even have remained involved, if our minds had been our own. But upon the utterance of that magic word we suddenly found that we were not the people we had been presenting ourselves as being. It's difficult enough to find out that one you care for is not the person she seemed to be; how much harder when it is *you* who are not what you thought you were?

It is a tremendous identity crisis, one that I am only now

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getting over. I, Quester, would not have behaved as I did aboard the *Snowball* if I had been in possession of all my faculties. We were tested, destructively tested in a way, to see if the injunction against discovering the underlying facts was strong enough to hold. It was, though I was beginning to see through the veils at the end. With a more consistent emergency I'm sure I would have had no inkling that it was anything but real. And that would be *much* worse. As it was, I was able to retain a degree of detachment, to entertain the notion that I might be insane. I was *right.*

The trip to the sun is thrill enough. Leave it at that, please, so that we may be sure of our loves and fears and not come to think that all might be illusion. I'll always have the memory of the way Solace looked when she woke from the dream she shared with me. The dream was gone; Solace was not the person I thought she might be. I'll have to look for solace elsewhere.

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 14

In the July issue we asked readers to send up a dozen science fictional "What's the question?" jokes, and we received the usual fine response. Read these slowly, aloud for full appreciation:

FIRST PRIZE

A: Heinlein
Q: What's the shortest distance between two heinpoints?
A: Three Hearts and Three Lions
Q: In Sword & Sorcery Poker, what beats a full castle?
A: Flashing Swords!
Q: What kinds of weapons wear old raincoats and cut-off trouser legs?
A: Hellstrom's Hive
Q: What is Hellstrom always scratching? (Similarly from others)
A: Piers Anthony's "Orn."
Q: Say, Guv, what's the author of "Chthon" 'ave in 'is car that he loves to 'onk?
A: Simak, Sohl, Spinrad and Sturgeon
Q: Name three sci-fi authors and something that goes great on a bagel with onion.

—Steve Steinberg

SECOND PRIZE

A: When Harlie Was One
Q: When was this picture taken?
A: The Sands of Mars
Q: What's this red, gritty stuff in my egg salad sandwich?
A: Dune
Q: Whad's da pard of a song dad isn'd da woids?
A: The Dancer from Atlantis
Q: Who's the one with the seashells over her gazongas?

—J. G. Sattler

RUNNERS UP

A: The Man Who Folded Himself
Q: Who is that peeking out of a manila envelope in the slush pile?
A: The Sheep Look Up
Q: How does a shepherd know when his fly is open?
A: The Mote in God's Eye
Q: What did it take nine million heavy-duty cranes and sixteen billion gallons of Visine to remove?
A: Dune/Dhalgren/Froomb
Q: How did little June Darlene Fromm pronounce her name when she had the mumps?

—Bruce Berges

A: The Demolished Man
Q: What is the state of the Competition Editor after each contest?
A: Buy Jupiter!
Q: What did the man who sold the moon do next?
A: The Sheep Look Up
Q: What happens when there's No Blade of Grass?
A: The Lathe of Heaven
Q: Where can you watch As the World Turns?

—Chris Leithiser

A: The Day the Sun Stood Still
Q: When did you get that awful sunburn?
A: Friends Come in Boxes
Q: How can you tell your friends from your enemies?
A: Postmarked the Stars
Q: Why has this letter taken 1732 years to be delivered?
A: Against the Fall of Night
Q: Why are you wearing that enormous hard hat?

—Mary H. Schaub

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A: A Feast Unknown
Q: What are they serving at the Con banquet?
A: Bill the Galactic Hero
Q: What did Sears Roebuck do after Captain Future used his charge card?
A: Logan's Run
Q: What was the result when Logan drank the water anyway?
A: Dorsai!
Q: What was the name of Gordy Dickson's book about the famous bandleader?

—Jerry House

A: The speed of light; the core of the sun; page 60 of Dhalgren.
Q: Name three points mankind will never reach.
A: 2001: A Space Odyssey and a furry sidewalk.
Q: What are two things you should never see sober?
A: The USA and Kate Wilhelm
Q: Who has put the most material into Orbit?

—Earl Wells

A: Cyborg
Q: What did Mr. and Mrs. Irving Borg name their son?
A: The Pi Man
Q: Who did Simple Simon meet going to his analytic geometry class?
A: Frankenstein Unbound
Q: What did they call the bride of Frankenstein after she burned her bra?

—John Grabowski

COMPETITION 15, suggested by Robert Silverberg

A recently published French history of science fiction was translated into English not long ago — and the translator Englished not only the text but also the titles of the books discussed, with odd results. We hear, for example, about A. E. van Vogt's *The Isher Arms Factory,* A Merritt's *Inhabitants of the Mirage,* John W. Campbell's *The Supreme Machine* and a lot of other books published under not quite those titles their first time around in the U.S. Submit up to a dozen translator-transformed titles that we are likely to encounter as additional European histories of sf find their way into print over here. For example:
I Am Not Afraid of Harm, by Robert A. Heinlein
The Einstein Streetcorner, by Samuel R. Delany
The Sweethearts, by Philip Jose Farmer
Dead Within, by Robert Silverberg

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 15 will appear in the April issue.

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